

This essay considers the socio-economic context of the 1972 report of Alberta's Commission on Educational Planning. The Commission's exogenous view of the role of education in society, conceptual difficulties of the "Alternative Futures" approach, inadequate consideration of economic factors, and the quandry of evolutionary versus revolutionary approaches to planning are discussed. The essay concludes that the Report does not meet the minimum requirements of a good educational plan.

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Is There a Plan in A Choice of Futures?

The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) must receive much of the credit for generating and widening interest in educational planning after the second world war. In the 1950's and early 1960's, UNESCO focussed on (what were at that time called) the underdeveloped countries of Asia, Latin America, and Africa in their efforts to make satisfactory progress in education. Through the 1960's interest in regional and national educational planning became widespread in the economically advanced western nations as well. The numerous publications on educational planning of the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (O.E.C.D.) and indeed, Alberta's Human Resources Research Council (H.R.R.C.) are evidence of such interest. Such international interest has resulted in the development of relatively sophisticated tools for planning educational processes and future systems.

A publication entitled *Economic and Social Aspects of Educational Planning* lists and discusses five approaches to, or methods of, relating educational plans to other aspects of planning: the social, the manpower, the education out-put ratio, the aggregate, and, the human resources assessment. The social approach or method is described as "scarcely a method at all[which] takes educational needs in terms of the current demand for education at the different levels and projects them on the basis of population increase, age distribution, *long-term national or social goals (inarticulate or defined) and on the basis of what is known about state and consumer preferences for education.*"¹ Although each of the approaches has advantages

¹*Economic and Social Aspects of Educational Planning* (Paris, UNESCO, 1964), p. 27 (italics supplied).

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and disadvantages, the social approach is now considered by many educational planners to be the most unrealistic and the least sophisticated one to adopt. There is no doubt that the futures forecast technique mentioned in *A Choice of Futures* helps to make more precise the articulation of national or social goals.² Despite the use of the futures forecast technique, however, *A Choice of Futures*⁶ is based on the social approach to educational planning. This has resulted in some fundamental conceptual and structural weaknesses in the report.

NO PROVINCIAL DEVELOPMENT PLAN

One very important difficulty which the Commission on Educational Planning has had to contend with was not of its own making. Many governments of the world, be they national or regional, undertake educational planning in the context of broader social and economic plans. This compels the educational planners to discipline their judgements in terms of the demographic, social and economic dimensions within which they *must* work. In Alberta, such a context was absent. The Commission was obviously aware of this vacuum and its recommendations for an integrated provincial development plan (see *A Choice of Futures*, pp. 72-73, 223-224) ought to receive serious attention.

Deprived of essential information and projections from other sectors of public activity, the Commission undertook to supply such information not primarily in terms of reasonable extrapolation of existing trends but in terms of a visionary, person-oriented social future for Alberta. Such a future, advocated in Parts I and II of *A Choice of Futures*, overlooks the difficulty John Sargent eloquently expressed in the following manner:

... what might be quite hard enough to achieve, if the social planners could start with a clean slate — which they could hope to do only if the people they were out to help were living in a state of primitive simplicity like Rousseau's noble savage — becomes much more difficult when the apostles of reform and uplift find themselves up against age-long obstacles deriving from a host of often quite unrelated historical and other causes. Obscurantism in various forms, religious, political, economic, among others . . . may have produced an accumulated mess on the slate. Well-intentioned but ill-advised attempts to remove the mess may only make it more sticky.⁵

EXOGENOUS VERSUS ENDOGENOUS VIEW OF EDUCATION

Let us be more specific. For our purposes, education may be considered as one of the five major social institutions of modern society, the others being: the state, the economy, religion and the family. ('Institutions' here

²*Perspectives on Educational Planning* (Edmonton: Human Resources Research Council, 1972) pp. 39-41.

³Walter H. Worth, *A Choice of Futures*, Report of the Commission on Educational Planning, Alberta (Edmonton: Queen's Printer, 1972).

⁴*Towards the Development of a Socio-Political Data Bank for Alberta* (Human Resources Research Council, 1972).

⁵"The Educational Aspects of Planning," *The Year Book of Education 1954* (Yonkers-on-Hudson: World Book, 1954), p. 236.

means formal, recognized and established ways of pursuing some activity in society). The extent to which education can lead—or develop the potential for leading—the other social institutions in bringing about social change is a matter of scholarly controversy.

The Commission has taken an exogenous view of the role of education in society, namely the view that education can, in a sense, stand apart from other social institutions and influence their future course. This is evident in several places in *A Choice of Futures*. (see pp. 31, 34, 36, 38, 45, 46, 170, 174, 182). The following quote expresses the exogenous view well:

Our motive for planning may be adaptive or reconstructive. The former is aimed at anticipating trends and adapting to them. The latter involves deliberate intervention to alter expected events. Adaptation involves planning for the future, while reconstruction involves planning of the future. Given the futures-forecasts and sense of direction previously outlined, it follows that the efforts of Albertans ought to be increasingly directed toward the planning of the future. Reconstruction would involve setting and keeping in motion those activities that will encourage the anticipation of human and social needs, while encouraging a responsiveness to them.⁶

However, practical experience shows that in the short run, education as a rule can implement only those changes accepted or demanded by the dominant institution or institutions, for example, the economy, as *A Choice of Futures* recognizes.⁷ In the long, run, however, education *can* play a part in changing individual attitudes which may bring about changes in the other social institutions. Recognition of this endogenous nature of the role of education in modern societies ought to make us wary of suggesting a choice of futures and future of choices as the main slogans of an educational plan.

A commission on educational planning brought into existence by an established provincial government ought to be particularly wary of making such recommendations. The modern era has been witness to several social, political and economic revolutions. We mean by revolutions sweeping, sudden changes in the structures and distribution of power in a specific social institution or in a society (and not changes in fashion trends, as Madison Avenue would have us believe). The kind of society *A Choice of Futures* recommends requires a social revolution to get it started and Dr. Worth, at least once, makes an oblique recognition of this fact.⁸ An established governmental authority is not likely to recommend or accept such a course of action. In other words, socio-economic planning (including educational planning) in a relatively stable society definitely implies rational, systematic analysis leading to evolutionary change. It is perhaps hard but vitally necessary to recognize that for any specific planning period, evolutionary changes which can be prescribed must take sufficient account of the many constraining social structures and processes to which Sargent alluded. *A Choice of Futures* is quite innocent of such recognition.

⁶*A Choice of Futures*, p. 218.

⁷*Ibid.*, pp. 182, 219.

⁸*Ibid.*, p.222.

CONCEPTUAL DIFFICULTIES OF THE “ALTERNATIVE FUTURES” APPROACH

At a technical level, the “alternative futures” approach can be criticised for lack of precision. How would the planner specify the criteria in terms of which educational “needs” are to be defined? Herbert S. Parnes points out that the social approach (within which we have located the “alternative futures” approach) “cannot yield unique estimates of enrolment figures or teacher requirements or costs.” It may be objected that the “manpower approach” [or any other approach] also lacks precision and this, of course, is true. But in that case the lack of precision results from the technical difficulties of estimating needs that can, conceptually, be precisely defined. In the “[social] approach,” the difficulty is conceptual, not technical.⁹ Every educational plan is a systematic effort to attain social, political and economic goals by building on or changing in an evolutionary way what already exists. the more *precise* the statement of goals, the greater will be the internal consistency of the plan and the possibility of achieving these goals. The less precise the statement of goals, consistency and possibility of success will suffer. Furthermore, imprecise statements of goals makes it virtually impossible to *apply* systems theory to educational planning because systems theory assumes quite specific—preferably measurable—identification of goals. To recommend in Parts I and II a person-oriented society in a general way and in Part V a systems approach to educational planning is, to say the least, inconsistent.

INADEQUATE CONSIDERATION OF THE ECONOMY

Five major social institutions were identified above (see p.122). Parts I and II of *A Choice of Futures* do make several references to the probable changes in the institutions of family and religion. However, the references to the state and the economy are relatively incomplete. The Commission may argue that no significant changes in the organizational system of the state are envisioned although it does recommend participatory democracy in abstract terms. But, what of the economy? As a result of the industrial revolution and attendant social changes, education has become closely wedded to the economic life of every modern society. Neither *A Choice of Futures* nor *Social Futures Alberta 1970-2005*¹⁰ has undertaken a systematic examination of the economic feasibility or general economic implications of its recommendations for a “person-oriented society.” In fact, one gets the distinct impression that the economy is treated as one treats “nature”: it is there.

EVOLUTION VERSUS REVOLUTION

If, in fact, the Commission was interested in initiating the process of building a new kind of society, it could presumably have submitted its proposed blue-print—prior to preparing an educational plan—to as wide a

⁹Herbert S. Parnes, *Forecasting Educational Needs for Economic and Social Development* (Paris: O.E.C.D., 1962), pp. 64-5.

¹⁰*Social Futures Alberta 1970-2005* (Edmonton: Human Resources Research Council, 1972).

public debate as *A Choice of Futures* has received. Submission to public debate would have compelled the Commission to specify in much greater detail the blue-print's institutional implications. (see definition of "institutions above, p. 123)

Wide public debate need not necessarily have compelled the Commission to accept a diluted consensus. Such debate could have alerted the Commission to the personal and institutional processes which would advance or hinder the realisation of its proposed goals. The Report does occasionally indicate the Commission's awareness of such processes. The references to staff-domination in Alberta Universities as well as recognition of the distinction between functional versus paper regions within the province are evidences of such awareness. (However, the Report also has a Figure about "Participation of the People of Alberta in Governance" which is far more formal than functional.¹¹ But what of other processes such as the open or covert influence of the corporate sector of our economy on the educational system? We may cite another example. Let us assume that the Commission had publicized its person-oriented society model. Assume further that several religious organizations had raised with the Commission the question: where would our children get their exposure to the person-oriented values? Such feedback would have compelled the Commission to discuss the specific educational situations within which such value transmissions might take place. Such a discussion would have been preferable to the very general discussion on religion and values.¹² Similarly, submissions from interest groups such as teachers would have helped the Commission to identify points of resistance and to indicate ways of adequately dealing with them. In short, a good planning document must take account of both technical and political problems in its recommendations.

The argument advanced up to now may be summarised as follows: the Commission might have taken one of two paths. It could have been realistic about the endogenous nature of education in Alberta society and recommended *evolutionary* changes which took full account of the existing governmental, economic, educational, religious and familial constraints. In pursuing such an approach, the dominance of the economy and of the state would have necessarily been a crucial consideration. Or, the Commission could have proposed revolutionary changes in Alberta society which again took full account of existing constraints. This is so because in either case, to put it colloquially, you have to know where you're at. But in the latter case the Commission would provide the educational system with guidelines on how to overcome the constraints. The emphasis in the former case would be on economic considerations. "A little bit of this, a little bit of that" (to quote a line from the musical 'Fiddler on the Roof') do not a good plan make. Furthermore, hard walls of resistance, the trumpets of Jericho notwithstanding, do not fall to clamorous noises alone.

¹¹*A Choice of Futures*, pp. 128-129, 72, 124.

¹²*Ibid.*, p. 176.

REQUIREMENTS OF A GOOD EDUCATIONAL PLAN

Although one might personally prefer a revolutionary approach, the Commission would have been constrained to follow the first path. In that case, it might have produced an educational plan for the foreseeable future, say, five to ten years. Such an educational plan, if it is to be taken seriously, must have the following types of information: project the future size and demographic composition of the population for a period of five to ten years; postulate minimum political, religious and familial expectations of education in both quantitative and qualitative terms; develop a profile of the economy and the levels of economic activity by sectors and sub-sectors; establish manpower requirements which flow from the presumed levels of economic activity in every sector and; translate the occupational data thus obtained into its educational component.

At this point, a combined interpretation of minimum social expectations and occupational need will provide the basic targets for the planning period. The other steps in the planning process are; assessment of quantitative changes required at different educational levels; estimation of the physical plant and other material capacity needed to reach planned targets; assessment of qualitative aspects such as the adequacy of existing scholarship ladders, necessity for institutionalizing cooperation among different levels and agencies of education as well as between education and other sectors of society; examination of the comparative cost and efficiency of alternative technologies of teaching and teacher-training methods; study of these costs in terms of availability of resources; reconciliation of the proposed educational plan with development plans in other sectors and; examination of types of incentives necessary to achieve plan targets.¹³

A CHOICE OF FUTURES AS AN EDUCATION PLAN DOCUMENT

No educational plan will ever meet all of these requirements to everyone's satisfaction. Despite theoretical and technical advances in educational planning in the past two decades, more is still unknown than known about translating planning theory into successful practice. For this reason, among many others, educational planning still is more art than science. After admitting all this, we might still have expected *A Choice of Futures* to contain more detailed and dove-tailed discussions encompassing the points listed above. As matters now stand, one can see the necessary information for a good plan discussed in various parts of *A Choice of Futures* but the links between them are missing. However, there are two exceptions. The recommendations for creating the Early Ed television programme and the Alberta Academy have internal consistency and can be shown to derive from the general stance in Parts I and II of the Report. It is interesting to note, however, that these two systems would be (a) additions to (b) the bottom and top of the existing educational pyramid in Alberta. One has difficulty with regards to most of the other recommendations: one may agree with the

¹³*Economic and Social Aspects*, pp. 32-37.

desirability of Mode III process variable in certain circumstances, or disagree with the inane statement that "Technology, is, in itself, value-free" or marvel at the mysterious parable about the meaning of the melon.¹⁴ But when one attempts to locate a specific suggestion or recommendation within the context of a plan one's frustration knows few bounds.

This assertion does not imply that a provincial educational plan must work out the specific details applicable to every sub-system of education. Thus it would be unrealistic to expect that a provincial educational plan must specify the scholarship ladder in a particular sub-system such as The University of Calgary. What a plan must do, however, is to indicate the general guidelines for a scholarship ladder, how such a ladder complements the other parts of the plan and what departures from existing practices such guidelines imply and what difficulties might be foreseen in implementing them. Planning units within particular sub-systems, then can work out detailed recommendations and adjustments.

The Commission's response here might be that it wished to produce a report which would interest the "average" citizen. Producing a report in non-technical language is indeed very important. Could not the Commission have produced such a main report supported by a series of separate technical reports? These technical reports could have systematically, logically and rigorously supported the development of the stances and recommendations of the main report. The relevant publications of H.R.R.C. fail to do this although some of them contain excellent advice which the Commission might have heeded.¹⁵ *A Choice of Futures* with or without "A Readers Companion," one suspects, satisfies neither the average citizen nor the serious scholar because it contains undigested mixtures of facts and opinions, abstruse pronouncements, lofty principles and detailed recommendations.¹⁶

The answer to the question posed as the title of this essay regrettably, then is: no.

¹⁴*A Choice of Futures*, pp. 156, 216, 169.

¹⁵A. Riffel, *Education Planning Re-examined* (Edmonton: Human Resources Research Council, 1971).

¹⁶Bunny Wright, "The Schools," *Calgary Herald* (December 4, 1972), p. 4