

The Changing Nature of British Educational Aid

by John Anderson*

Most interested people assume that formal education plays a vital part in controlling the direction and pace of a nation's progress. Find the right type of education, expand it at the correct rate, and a generation of better prepared people will grow up to tackle the tasks of development. Certainly much of Britain's aid to developing countries is based on this premise, with nearly one third of the total aid annual budget (about £200 million) being spent on some form of education. In this article I should like to look more closely at this assumption, and the aiding policy that stems from it.

Before examining this issue directly it is important to consider the historical background. In most colonies the authorities attempted to establish schools relevant to colonial conditions, which meant an emphasis on agriculture and practical skills. In general, colonial peoples rejected this approach and pressed for the academic schools associated so clearly in British life with social and political mobility. Today, as President Nyerere has stressed, such models appear increasingly irrelevant and disruptive in developing countries, and new, development oriented education systems are urgently needed. But whatever efforts the new planners make, they can find few precedents, at least in the formal systems of the Western world.

A glance at British history shows that formal education developed as a consequence, of, or at most in conjunction with, economic growth and political progress. There was little conscious planning and the academic models, if anything a product of tradition, class

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interests and nineteenth century laissez-faire, had little to do with technological advance. It is only relatively recently that appreciable attempts to use the reforming potential of education have been made. The 1944 Act made a breakthrough, and the first appreciable results are signified by the comprehensive schools and Plowden.

This new approach to educational development, its promise of greater efficiency and flexibility and its underlying egalitarianism may appear attractive to both developing countries and donors. However, some further observations should be considered.

1. Disregarding the political arguments and the polemics of the black and red papers, the educational scene in Britain presents a vast array of ideas and scale, ranging from single, teacher based experiments to such newly institutionalised agencies as Schools Council projects and Educational Research departments. But sound, broadly based educational research takes time and resources, so that whilst there are many interesting possibilities, there are as yet relatively few final products which have been fully tested and accepted. To get things moving, many projects have been given a narrow prescriptive emphasis, relating them particularly to urban/industrial problems and limiting basic analytical findings in such a way that the results will have little meaning beyond their own context. In other cases, basic assumptions, such as the belief that television should only be used as a support to well trained teachers, or that adult education and school education should be treated as separate fields, seem to hinder the innovative potential for developing countries.

2. The education system in many developing countries are under great strain: qualified teachers and capital are scarce, and administrative capacity to organise, let alone revolutionise, is tightly stretched. Yet changes are required in so many conflicting directions. The curriculum, for instance, is to be modernised, made more relevant to local conditions and national needs, and made more practical, all at one and the same time. Education in most new nations is caught in the crossfire between giving priority to such economic considerations as maximum production or employment, and politicians with a wary eye to their electorate's immediate demands. In these circumstances, such innovations as 'integrated'

days, Mode 3 examinations and heuristically based science teaching do not translate easily, especially when one remembers that perhaps only 50% of the children go to school, and the overriding concern of those who do, is to compete for the very few wage earning positions the economy can offer.

3. In recent years social scientists have taken an interest in the development and reforming potential of formal education. Economists in particular have been able to show how certain types of education systems have failed to match manpower requirements, and in consequence misuse resources. Yet as they take an increasingly broader view of development, economists seem to be less and less certain of the applicability of their own measurements, for instance G.N.P., and consequently seem less certain than ever as to how to prescribe in the educational sphere. Certainly they have made educationists conscious of costs and ordering priorities, but when the revelations of manpower planning and cost-benefit analysis are summed up, they offer little more than guidelines in but one area of the educational planners' work. For beyond the tasks of projecting and costing the progress of a given system of education, planners must concern themselves increasingly with the variety of interacting dimensions in which the system might be altered, for instance the design and dispersal of plant, the balance between 'school' and 'out of school' activities, the age/examination structure, and a whole range of choices in the areas of curriculum and teaching technology. Further, such factors as changeable socio/political climates, continually shifting administrative personnel and inter-ministerial and professional rivalries, do not only emphasise the complexity and wide range of the educational planners' task, but point to its essentially practical nature and the need to limit the use of theory to what is possible within any particular planning context.

For the present, then, reference to established educational 'know how' can produce no easy prescriptions, even in the more 'developed' nations, let alone the 'less developed'. Of course, the aid process must go on, the flow of teachers, books and equipment and practical ideas cannot simply be turned off until surer ground can be found. But the stopgap nature of this task must be recognised. In medicine, if a healing drug

turns out only to be a palliative, it is used until a better drug is found. But this involves setting in motion and linking together a whole range of clinical observations and trails, and basic research. This, it seems, is the point at which educational planning in general, and hence the planning of educational aid to developing countries, has arrived.

In these circumstances, any suggestions for future action would need much more space than is available here, but perhaps a few conclusions can be drawn.

1. The prescriptive tradition in British educational aid, whether stemming from overselling by those who influence and administer British aid or the prejudices of ex-colonial people, must be altered. The notion of adapting British models, whether old or new, offers no real solution, but British expertise and resources offered in a co-operative problem solving context still have much to offer. In these circumstances, a new approach to research and development in the educational aspects of overseas aid is needed.

2. At the moment there is a charge that development studies neglect education and educationists neglect development. What links, for instance, are there between Institutes for Development Studies, and the Centre for Educational Development Overseas, and for that matter, to what extent do either consider the type of fundamental analysis of the education process being attempted by bodies like the Centre of Educational Technology? Some way of creating a more integrated body of knowledge is needed, which not only considers the interaction of the education process with the economic and social progress in a society, but also accounts for the dynamic nature of an education system, and the varying forms it might take.

3. In a recent report, 'Education in Developing Countries', the Ministry of Overseas Development review educational aid strategy. At least three important points stand out:-

a) Educational aid must be phased so that services give way to training, training to establishing training and research facilities, which in turn will create a basis for the mutual interchange of staff.

b) The scope of 'what education is' must be expanded. As mentioned earlier, academic formal education had little to do with Britain's own technical and commercial progress, but a strong case can be made to show that informal, part time education, for example in Sunday schools and Mechanics Institutes, did. In developing countries all educational possibilities, particularly those in the informal field - youth and adult centres, extension schemes, and so forth - must be given careful consideration.

c) The principal of reciprocity must be recognised. Effective educational aid can only be achieved in a partnership, which, whilst appreciating that the imbalances of colonial history must be accounted for, realises that both parties must be able to put forward proposals, and initiate frank discussions. To achieve this position, it is essential that Britain realises that, beyond the general improvement in the world situation and the commercial advantages intrinsic in an educational aid scheme, her planners and teachers gain experience and vital insights into fundamental educational problems. What wouldn't the Plowden Committee have given to know how parents in Kenya have put up 4,000 pre-school day care centres on a self help basis in the last seven years!

Somewhat ironically, the Ministry of Overseas Development has recently lost its identity, and a dispersal of its educational functions is now contemplated. This seems to highlight the critical nature of the issues raised above, for if a real understanding of the educational aid functions is to be obtained, surely there must be stability and continuity within the aid apparatus itself.