

Horrible Schools for the Whole World

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At a United Nations meeting in the year 2000, the world's governments agreed on the goal of enrolling every child on the planet in primary schooling by 2015.¹ Strangely, this lofty plan does not say

anything about the quality of schooling; the whole idea is to get children into government-approved classrooms, apparently regardless of what happens there.

The reports of UN agencies like Education for All (EFA) are full of ideas on how to get kids to come to school in third-world countries: making education entirely taxpayer funded (commonly by taxpayers from richer countries), providing free medication or food to students who show up, or even just paying cash to the parents in return for kids' attendance.

But are the pupils who spend more time at these schools actually learning more as a result? MIT's Abdul Latif Jameel reports, "Several programs which have raised participation, from providing worm medicine to free

meals, show no evidence that children are learning more as a result."²

And EFA's Fast Track Initiative admits that, "in nearly all developing countries the levels of learning achievement are shockingly low. . . . In many low-income countries students learn virtually nothing and end up functionally illiterate."³

In fact, the situation is so bad that Jameel says one area to be improved is "more regular attendance of teachers."

Public education has been a slowly degenerating disaster throughout the West, and now it seems we're exporting it to the rest.

A Crucial Fallacy

The international education agencies seem to have been duped by what the great Austrolibertarian Murray Rothbard calls, "A crucial fallacy . . . confusion between formal schooling and *education* in general."

Promising to educate every child in every culture through primary schooling is a bit like promising to clothe every child in every climate by giving them a parka.



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¹Universal primary education is goal #2 of the Millennium Development Goals.

²Jameel, "Primary Education for All," *Fighting Poverty: What Works*, Fall 2005.

³Fast Track Initiative, "Learning for All: An Educational Case for Financial Replenishment of EFA FTI."



Education is a lifelong process of learning, and learning takes place not only in school, but in all areas of life.

Snowsuits are nice, but they aren't the best attire for every occasion.

In fact, until recently, nearly all children learned the important skills of life largely outside of schools, through observing and joining in with the activities of adults.⁴ Rothbard writes with respect to American education, "Education is a lifelong process of learning, and learning takes place not only in school, but in all areas of life. When the child plays, or listens to parents or friends, or reads a newspaper, or works at a job, he or she is becoming *educated*."

All the medicine handouts and free school lunches proposed by EFA are attempts to offset the direct economic opportunity cost of the child spending a day at school instead of working on the farm or factory. This does take into account the child's economic contribution to the family's labor. But what about that labor's educational contribution to the child? What about the educational opportunity cost?

If students in many schools are learning very little and graduating "functionally illiterate," if attendance doesn't actually produce real education, and if teachers sometimes don't even bother to show up, perhaps the parents and children feel they would learn more outside the schools than in.

Sadly, this important educational opportunity cost doesn't seem to be on the global pedagogical

philanthropists' radar. Jameel speaks only of the "complex relationship between school quality and participation. It might seem reasonable to expect that families are more likely to bear costs like fees, uniforms or lost income for a good quality education."

And, he says, "There is no consensus on why so many poor children don't attend school, or the best way to increase participation. If children's labor is crucial to their family's welfare . . . it may prove very difficult to attract more children to school."

There is no mention of any learning that might happen while the child is outside the classroom.

So for a moment, let us grant this assumption: Only schooling is education. No learning happens outside of schools.

Under this assumption, not only do children's minds profit nothing from a day spent at home or in the bush, but most of the parents of children in the Third World are themselves totally un-"educated"—benighted savages whose heads are filled with cobwebs.

Thus, for our benevolent pedagogical overlords, it could make sense to get those kids away from their parents and into schools as soon as possible, even if, as EFA acknowledges, "in some countries nearly every aspect of the schooling system is seriously deficient—infrastructure, teaching materials, teacher availability and qualifications, lack of student assessments and lack of incentives for improving learning outcomes."⁵

Obedience for All

So, if kids aren't learning to work and play in their traditional cultures, but they aren't learning to read or do

⁴In India's Andaman Islands, when the indigenous Jarawa people were asked if they would like their kids to go to government school, they responded, "you and your children constantly rely on doing something with paper, look at you . . . listening and working on paper. Our children do not need to do so, they need to know about finding and locating things in the forest. It is work! It has to be learned!" See Vishvajit Pandya, "From Dangerous to Endangered."

⁵Fast Track Initiative, "Learning for All."

math in these atrocious schools either, what are they learning? In a word, obedience.

To the extent that the schools are operated and authorized through the national states, the children are taught to identify with those states. All the tests are in the national language, and children must memorize the state-approved version of history.

Oh, there is often a grand effort to make schools receptive to local cultures, but so long as the state pays the piper, the state calls the tune. And the sound every state wants to hear is children singing its national anthem.

Rothbard writes of “a conscious scheme to coerce the mass of the population into a mould desired by the Establishment. Recalcitrant minorities were to be forced into a majority mould; all citizens were to be inculcated in the civic virtues, notably and always including obedience to the State apparatus.”

Perhaps, some might hope, this force is counterbalanced by the influence of the international aid agencies that support the schools. And what do these organizations hope to inculcate in the children? Take a look at what the EFA Global Monitoring Report claims as a major benefit of schooling: “Education has a key role in fostering national and international support for the multilateral governance needed to address problems such as finance, trade, security and environmental sustainability.”⁶

That is to say, kids who go through schools funded by international bureaucracies are likely to approve of the other programs run by such bureaucracies. Even if you do believe that more “multilateral governance” is needed for finance, trade, etc., isn’t it a little disturbing that one stated benefit of UN-sponsored schools is more support for UN-sponsored activities?

Finally, regardless of whether states or NGOs fund the schools, to succeed in schooling means to win the approval of your teachers. Each child’s grades tell him how well he has met his masters’ expectations. Innovation is rewarded rarely, and defiance never. This is perfect preparation for a world of the total state, where cops and bureaucrats lay out rules for everyone, and there is no way to succeed except to obey their commands.

In the world of free commerce, the way to make a profit is to do something that other people think cannot be done.

Success comes from taking risks, from seeing what others miss, and from convincing others to join you—not from hanging on every word uttered by benevolent authorities.

In fact, in many poorer countries, the office jobs (the only ones for which schooling is actually required) are nearly all government and international NGO jobs. So those kids who do succeed in school end up moving to the capital and writing reports on the importance of international funding for schools.

The kids who do not do well in school go back home to the farms or the factories, having spent years of their lives learning, in some cases, “virtually nothing.” But since the bureaucrats seem to believe that



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⁶*Education for All Global Monitoring Report*, Policy Paper 04, June 2012.

the traditional cultures the children might have spent those years immersed in held no knowledge anyway, this might not be seen as much of a loss.

Setting Young Minds Free

No doubt, some kids who would profit from schooling are being kept out of it by very bad things: wars, forced prostitution, and outright poverty. EFA's programs to make schooling more accessible could have a huge positive impact on such children's lives.

But instead of focusing on gimmicks to get kids into the classes governments want to teach, educators should focus on materials that kids want to learn, or that their parents are willing to invest in.

That cannot happen until we break the chain between government and education. It cannot happen until we once again, in Rothbard's words, "give children their head," and let them seek out "a genuine and truly free education, both in and out of formal schools."

Of course, the quality of instruction tailored to individual children and communities might not be easily measurable by states and statisticians. But if schooling someday provides a service that fits their needs, the students will come. ■

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