

No choice for twilight students



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EDUCATION is back in vogue as one of the main topics of news. However, it is curious how the issues are debated varies among the different levels of education. On the one hand we have debates about higher education about the relationship between education and the economic recession and whether or not, as a nation, can now afford the expansion rates of the past couple of years. On the other hand, we have debates in secondary education about parental choice and educational standards as demonstrated through "league tables" as if they had nothing at all to do with the economy. I, for one, am puzzled.

Why is it that these two sets of debates are taking place simultaneously without regard to the consequences the one on the other? I suspect that it is as many political commentators have noted, that the Government is confused and has not worked out its strategy either for the economy or education.

It seems clear that the expansion of higher education was a cynical move to deal with the problems of recession rather than a clearly considered strategy to improve the supply of educated and skilled man – or woman. And indeed, it has probably been the case that higher education expansion has muted the effects of recession both for the better educated school-leavers and mature students.

There is plenty of evidence of students who are impoverished and having to struggle with full-time or even part-time courses and jobs to make ends

meet. The jobs that they have to take – in the twilight hours or night-shifts – obviously detract from their ability to pursue their course to the full. Indeed, there are examples of students whose employers have refused them time off at crucial "educational" moments, such as the night-shift the night before a finals' exam or the time of the exam itself. There are other examples of students not being able to afford the fares, in London at least, to come in for all their lectures and seminars.

The "free-for-all" also seems now to operate in secondary education. First, we have been subject to a barrage of "evidence" about educational standards through the publication, a couple of weeks ago, of the school examination league tables. The so-called evidence was at best inaccurate and fre-

quently plain wrong. It is a shocking indictment of Government that they could rush into print without carefully checking their figures. Whether or not they themselves actually produced them or farmed them out to some university consultancy is immaterial. My second comment would be that it is an entirely capricious if not cynical abuse of public resources to publish these data. In a situation where we are all being asked to exercise restraint in the use of public resources, surely it would have been appropriate for the Government to do so.

The tables only serve to discredit government and its policies. At the very least, they demonstrate the truism that "to him that hath be given", although in this case it appears that it is slightly more a case of "to her that hath be given".

Moreover, the "high priestess" of educational research – Sally Tomlinson – wrote a succinct and telling critique of the league tables in a brief letter to *The Guardian*. She pointed out that sophisticated educational research on the relationship between educational achievement or attainment and educational provision demonstrated the critical nature of the school and its ethos.

Her own study, *The School Effect*, with David Smith of the Policy Studies Institute, is now taken as the "bible" of such research on school effectiveness. Tomlinson and Smith show that, controlling for socio-economic differences in multi-racial comprehensive schools, school ethos is the most significant variable. The relationships between

examination results and socio-economic background cannot simply be ignored.

However, it is not this kind of sophisticated research that the Government is after, or even intent on promoting despite its genuflections in this direction through the Universities Funding Council's research assessment exercise. (As a member of one of the UFC's research assessment panels, I hope it is not breaking a confidence to say that as part of our final decision-making we decided jocularly to "rate" the Government on its criterion of research quality and concluded that the most we could in all honesty allocate for this research evidence would be a "one", given that the UFC does not allow a rating of zero!)

Nor does the Government really intend that this information will serve the interests of the economic system through trying to meet the needs of employers. In discussions on secondary education and educational standards the question of the role and importance of the economy and employers seems to have disappeared.

The day before the league tables were published I attended an Institute of Economic Affairs seminar on the topic of *Education and Choice* which had been postponed from the early summer, due to lack of applicants. Indeed the organisers had had to lower the price to ensure a respectable number of attendants.

The seminar aimed at comparing and contrasting American and British policies and experiences. The postponed

time turned out to be well timed given that it was about a week after the United States presidential election and the second keynote speaker was Terry Moe, author of an American statistical analysis and right-wing text, *Politics, Markets and America's Schools*. He argued in favour of a market system of education, but recognised that such a policy was now in retreat.

The main speaker, however, was John Patten, the Secretary of State for Education, who argued elegantly, if vaguely, for a system of educational provision that gave parents the key role on both moral and educational grounds. He wants an educational market both for its own sake and that of parents. Gone were the arguments that this would contribute to economic progress or development. The argument hinged upon an entirely individualist morality, and the league tables were justified to that end – ensuring parents had the best possible information (!) – to make their choices.

It surprised me that both he and Terry Moe referred to "her" when talking about parental choices for children. Having been aware of the gendered nature of parenthood, these two New Righters were ahead of me in terms of the gendered nature of childhood, until I realised that being true to their principle of parental choice as paramount, they were both talking personally and about their own daughters. What better proof did we need of where their true interests lie – in the personal rather than national or economic significance of choice and standards.