THE *Ideological Debate in Education*

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THE IDEOLOGICAL DEBATE IN EDUCATION

The first thing I should say is that the wrong Epstein is speaking to you today. The proper Epstein is my wife who works at the University of Chicago Laboratory Schools and who has been involved in most phases of school administration. It is through her, of course, that I have developed a strong interest in school education.

A second reason for my interest in this topic is our three children who have gone through the Laboratory Schools. Their successes and failures have piqued my interest as a parent who has attended his fair share of school plays and concerts. Moreover, as a teacher at a graduate law school, I retain a keen interest in what happens in schools everywhere to understand better the training and outlook my students acquired when they were younger. What we can achieve with these students depends very much on how they were educated at school.

Before we left for New Zealand, my wife, upon reading a magazine called *The Independent School*, told me to be aware of the close affinity between the University of Chicago Laboratory Schools and New Zealand schools. She explained that in one of the magazine articles the author identified 10 schools as successful. They were listed in no particular order, but number eight on this list was the University of Chicago Laboratory Schools because it had "students as teachers, integrated learning, project-based learning, and collaborative learning". I never knew about any of those virtues, although apparently they go on at the school our children attend and have attended. And there, right below our entry, is "New Zealand's schools" written in the plural without differentiation.

The article gives New Zealand schools and the Laboratory Schools the same sort of nebulous assessment for involving students in the learning process, health services on site, life-long learning and so forth. I do not know whether these comments are meant to be praises or should be taken as criticisms, but I will treat them as the former. In any case, we are kindred souls in spite of our different origins.

When I began to think about this talk, however, my thoughts turned from the Laboratory Schools back to the environment in which I was raised: first as a New York City schoolboy from the age of five to 11 (from 1948 to 1954), and then later in a suburban school (from 1954 to 1960). I wanted to compare my thoughts about that education with some of the material on New Zealand that had been sent to me. I found concepts like child-centred education to be very elusive. Without further information, I could not say whether I am for or against such ideas. But I do have some confidence in my sense of what was good or bad about my own education and thus whether modern substitutes are better or worse. So let me stroll down that comparison path, before offering some general comments about the larger questions concerning how to teach controversial and politically charged subjects in schools.

Continuity and homogeneity

When I think back to my school days, the two themes that leap to my mind are continuity and homogeneity. Continuity is what I experienced in Public School 161 in Brooklyn as a youngster. If there were 37 children who showed up on the first day of my first grade class in 1948 with Mrs Litwin, 34 of them, at a good guess, were still there with Mr Greenberg when I left the school in 1954. So over the six years we got to know our classmates very well. That continuity also allowed teachers to know all about the children they were working with and how an individuated education for each could progress in a sensible fashion.

This stability gave us as students a very precise understanding of the relative abilities of one another, and that shared knowledge introduced a certain hierarchy. For example, on the athletic field we all knew who we wanted on our team and who we would rather have play for the opposition. This illustrates a truth that we are too willing to deny today – the implicit rating systems in virtually every area of life are as well known and as solidly established with pupils as they are with teachers.

To the extent that people try to suppress these ratings, they introduce an aura of unreality. Yet acknowledging them can lead to some bruised and hard feelings. But my teachers and fellow students had to recognise that these differences existed and to accept the fact that they mattered. As students we also had to recognise some truths about the significance of these hierarchies. One of these truths was that even though differences mattered, they did not matter so much that we could disdain those who were below the slot that we thought we occupied in any particular pecking order. The second truth was that there were multiple pecking orders. A student who was very poor at spelling might be very good at music. Whereas I, who was good at mathematics, could never hold a tune, though not for want of trying.

The uniformity I mentioned was, of course, the exact opposite of the diversity that we have today. Virtually everybody in my class was Jewish, and an important element of diversity was whether or not a student attended Hebrew lessons after school. This is vastly different from the situation of my children at the Laboratory Schools. When I read their class registers, often I cannot tell the nationality or the gender of a nontrivial fraction of the pupils from their first names. It is obviously a very different school environment from what I experienced. But even within the ethnic and religious uniformity there was an enormous amount of perceived social diversity. I mentioned the differences in intellectual abilities. There were also vast differences in interests. Some children were interested in community activities. Some were always running for student government, whereas others, including myself, were like General Sherman who said about the presidency, 'If nominated I will not run; if elected I will not serve'.

These observations should remind us that a population that looks homogenous, and perhaps a tad dull from the outside, could have within it very powerful variations. This diversity in my school raised many of the same dynamic tensions found in modern educational settings where the differences are more apparent, at least on the surface.

My observations of my children and their friends suggest that their school interactions are, notwithstanding the different populations, remarkably similar to those that I had experienced in my own classrooms between 40 and 50 years ago.

Forms of instruction

My education had features that I liked and others that I disliked. Oddly enough, my likes and dislikes are quite different from those which are frequently voiced today, which is why my own children have condemned me as a 'nerd'.

What I liked most about my own schooling was the asserted moral authority that the teachers had in their classrooms. To me it was a great source of comfort to know that my first grade class teacher could teach me how to add and subtract. The possibility that my teachers might know as little about the world as I did was one of the most frightening thoughts of my youth. How could I learn from somebody who did not know much more than me?

Also, I liked the reward system throughout the school. The teachers made quite clear what was good about your work and what was not, giving reasons for their judgments. If you got your work right, you would get ahead; if you got it wrong, you would have to do it again. To be able to know what counted as success and what counted as failure gave assurance that you were learning important things about the world that would enable you to navigate more confidently through its obstacles. The contrasting approach of always giving the same benign approval to children's work was, even at the time, unsettling, for that means work and performance no longer mattered. You knew that it was hypocritical to act as though all your classmates were equally good at all tasks, when it was commonly understood that the opposite was true.

Another aspect of my schooling that impressed me was our efforts to learn about subjects that were outside our own immediate experience. Knowing that books contained a body of knowledge to which you did not have direct access, but to which a teacher could point you, served as an enormous source of liberation. It is not that I did not learn from my friends, or from my family, or from listening to the radio, or (as time went on) from watching television. Rather, it was the sense that attending school was a high-return occupation, because the teachers would direct me to novel ideas that I might not be able to discover on my own.

So as students we felt liberated, not constrained, by the hierarchy, by the discipline, by a sense of the objectivity of knowledge, and by the fact that it was possible to make mistakes or do well, to take risks and fail, and to succeed and move ahead.

The content of school education

I also have distinct memories of what we learned in school. Rudimentary skills were stressed. I think I learned to write reasonably well, in part because I had teachers who drilled me on the parts of speech, and who taught me how to make subjects and verbs

agree and how to construct sentences with dependent clauses. Indeed, the way I teach graduate students at law school echoes the way I was taught in the second and third grades. For example, I never let students undertake unbounded research topics that require them to understand the deep structure of the Constitution of the United States. I have them begin with one particular case that talks about one clause of the Constitution, and I ask them to write a single paragraph about its content and purpose. If they can do that, I ask them to do a page, and then I ask them to do a couple of pages. What they discover is that the way in which you learn to write books is the same way in which you learn to build walls. You start with the small building blocks. You learn how to make the mortar, to put two bricks together, to build sections and finally to create the entire structure. The final structure is in every sense of the word a composition, literally understood.

The notion that students (or professors) can shortcut this building-up process by creating sweeping structures before they master the basic elements constitutes one of the great fallacies of some theories of modern education. I think it is fallacious for second graders and law school students alike. No doubt, as young school children we moaned and groaned about the drills, but what our teachers were doing was forcing us to deal with the building blocks, which could later be combined into some larger and more impressive structure.

Another aspect of my education that I prized (but too infrequently practised) was the insistence on memorisation as a necessary skill. My own children, particularly my two boys, are very much into theatre. When Benjamin, now 17, is told that he has to perform a scene from Shakespeare the next day, he can memorise the entire piece in 30 minutes because he has been engaged in the process of memorisation for his entire life. He does not regard this task as an impediment to his creativity as an actor. He has realised that you can never become the master of a craft by ignoring its constituent elements. Elliot at 14 has learned the same lesson earlier by imitating his older brother. All through school my education tended to stress those rote tasks, and for that I am very grateful. Even as a scholar, a strong memory saves an enormous amount of time in doing research and organising materials. Memory is not a substitute for creativity, but it offers a way to facilitate and expand the use of creative powers.

On the negative side of the ledger, some of the aspects that I disliked about my schooling were the limits set by the prescribed curriculum. Once we learned the curriculum, our teachers felt no particular obligation to teach us any more in that particular year about that particular subject. As a child I was skilled at mathematics and advanced very quickly through the basic curriculum. But once I reached a certain point, the school stopped pushing and I had to wait idly until the other children caught up. So for the next five years I learnt no more maths, which I thought was very wrong. But there was a clear sense at the time that an able child should only get so far ahead of the rest of the class. It was not as common for parents to push hard with instruction outside of home, and besides, I was perceived as sufficiently restless that no one really thought I had the patience for extra work.

This said, one of the nicest things about modern education is that it is often more flexible. At the Laboratory Schools there is a willingness in the upper years to send the really strong math students over to the University of Chicago math department to take undergraduate and even graduate-level courses. Able students will attend these college and graduate classes, but will then return to the school for other classes, sports and social activities. In my day, schools seemed unable to push the strong students and those with specialised interests. In my view, when you have children eager to learn something, you (either parents or schools) should hire the necessary tutors or give them the relevant books rather than leave them to become frustrated.

Ethnic and cultural diversity

I want to turn now to questions of ethnic diversity, the kind of social ethos that we encountered as students, and the sorts of public concerns that were raised. This was at a time in New York City where the issues of race – not so much of gender – were foremost in our minds.

I was in sixth grade in May 1954 when the US Supreme Court handed down its unanimous decision in *Brown v Board of Education*. This case said that on matters of race 'separate but equal' was no longer a viable constitutional concept, as it had been since the Court's earlier 1896 decision in *Plessy v Ferguson*. In effect, the 1954 Court took it upon itself to abolish racial segregation in all public schools in the United States, which was no small achievement. I can still remember Mr Greenberg stopping the class the next day and speaking about the case in optimistic but apprehensive terms. He hoped we would contemplate its significance in a world that did not have a 95 percent Jewish population. It was an extraordinary departure from the usual form of instruction, but its personal tone, the sense that relief had been long overdue no matter what lay ahead, had a powerful impact on this future lawyer.

New York schools at this time made other, more systematic, efforts to encourage racial tolerance, although I often did not realise at the time what was going on. For example, one of our standard songs went like something like this:

> My name is Thomas Jefferson,
> if I were born over the sea
> my name would not be Jefferson
> but maybe Jefferski
> or maybe Jefferwitz
> or Jefferoff
> or maybe Jeffercoo
> but nonetheless I want you to know
> it should be just the same to you.

I never realised at the time that this was a song essentially about tolerance of people of different nationalities. I was more interested in the music than in the message. We had another song on racial tolerance, and again the message flew past me until years later when I actually paid attention to the words. It went:

You get white milk from a brown skinned cow
The colour of the skin doesn't matter no how
Ho Ho Ho
Hee Hee Hee
The colour of the skin doesn't matter to me.

Now this was a very odd way to approach the explosive issues of national and racial identity. But it was, I think, fairly effective because we learned about toleration not through being preached at but rather through daily interactions within our own circumscribed universe. If children see teachers playing favourites, they are not going to internalise the principle of equal justice before the law. If they see a teacher who is rude to a janitor of a different race or colour they are not going to credit that teacher's preaching about racial tolerance. What one did informed what one said, then as now.

My own children are in a school where diversity is a pervasive theme because of the racial and ethnic composition of the student body and the faculty. But they intensely dislike being preached at in school assemblies and publications on the issue of diversity. It is not because they do not believe in diversity but because they think they have already practised it in the unselfconscious fashion that makes it an integral part of their own behaviour and value systems. They think detached preachers on the issue are either very dense, because they have not observed what actually happens, or endowed with a misguided sense of moral superiority that they are too eager to flaunt.

So that was the education I had at school. It was fairly provincial and fairly cloistered. But when I went into the wide world, first to Columbia College in New York City, then to Oriel College in Oxford, and then back to the Yale Law School as a student, and now as an academic at the University of Chicago, my education put me in very good stead both for its fundamental academic and social grounding, which did not stress grand political themes but low-level interaction. I still repeat a maxim that my father used to tell me: "It's a very dangerous person who loves humanity and hates people". We deal with people all the time, but have relatively little to do with humanity, so we might as well love people. Humanity will take care of itself, one person at a time, if everybody follows this maxim.

Child-centred education

What happens in education today depends very much on how some elusive-sounding programmes are implemented. Consider, for example, the popular notion of child-centred education. The way it was described to me by my wife, who champions the notion, was as follows: "When you are teaching children you should have in mind a clear set of skills that you want them to learn and objectives you want them to attain. But the best way to motivate them is to teach that particular set of skills in the context of problems in which they have already developed an independent interest. So, for example, if the year is 1998 and everybody is talking about the sinking of the Titanic, perhaps you can organise education around that ship".

That done, the focus becomes more rigorous. It is not as though you let the kids decide what physical laws govern the construction of ships or the practice of navigation. What

you do is integrate the various subject matters to teach them something about the laws of displacement so they can calculate volume. You teach them a little bit about navigation, about safety laws, about the death of most steerage passengers when the first class passengers were saved and so on. By the time you are finished you have integrated the humanities with the sciences, with mathematics and so forth.

The basic strategy, as explained to me, is to construct assignments that seize on a topic of current interest to the pupils to advance your educational goals. If you have a student body that is keen on baseball, you can teach percentages by having students calculate batting averages. If that is what child-centred education means, then I guess I count myself as one of its staunchest supporters. But I fear that these examples do not fully illustrate child-centred education for many of its current practitioners.

The rival view of child-centred education celebrates the subjective preferences of students and praises their ostensible ability to create their own value structures and social judgments. Students then become the ultimate arbiters of truth in any given society or culture. Let the pupil say one thing and the teacher another, and it is impossible to resolve the impasse, perhaps even on matters as simple as addition or subtraction, the spelling of words, the dates in history or something of that sort. Now, I doubt that anybody goes to that extreme, although there are literary types who claim that pi (as in the ratio of a circumference to diameter) is a 'social construction'. But matters of degree count in education, so the important question is how close to that extreme are educators willing to edge. Alas, I sensed in some of the literature on New Zealand education a tendency to move to an alarming degree in that standardless, subjective direction. I hope that my impressions on this score are wrong.

Values and political issues

The second feature of modern education that troubles me concerns the set of values promoted as part of a coherent intellectual curriculum. In my schooling, teachers promoted those values that helped their pupils lead happy and productive lives. They stressed individual responsibility, punctuality, reliability, promise keeping, trustworthiness and the like. The clear implication was that no matter what walk of life you came to occupy, these virtues would stand you in good stead.

My educational system thus sported an implicit paternalism. Teachers wanted us to take on faith that these virtues would help us some day. They wanted us to accept that developing these particular moral characteristics, along with certain intellectual skills, were necessary for our own growth and success even if we could not quite understand why.

Today a different set of educational objectives seems to be more urgent. Emphasis is no longer on refining those skills and characteristics that lead to excellence. Rather, I hear much too much talk about education as an introduction, indeed an indoctrination, into the principles of gender equity, and that such is needed so that students will be able to participate in deliberative democracy to decide – in accordance with the right values of course – the great political questions of the day. Lost in this new emphasis is the concern

with the mastery of basic skills that will serve young people well whether they enter public or commercial life – the fundamental building blocks I referred to above.

Now I am not against educators participating in public life. I have spent most of my professional career as an academic working on controversial public issues. So what is it that leaves me uneasy about discussing political issues in educational institutions? Well, a lot of it depends on the level of education. I certainly do not want any teacher to push political theories on those who have not acquired the independent basis on which to form intelligent judgments. So I think the aim should be to get younger children to understand smaller problems, technical problems, problems for which there are clearer answers. Discussion of public issues can wait until children move into the upper years of high school, when you start teaching them courses like economics. Certainly when they get into college it is no holds barred.

One of the unfortunate results of pushing political issues at younger children is that they may acquire a sense of political dissatisfaction and thus prepare the ground for their own failure. They seize on a set of standard excuses to explain why they have not succeeded or, if they do succeed, why they cannot claim the credit; in both cases the outcome is seen as the result of the system rather than individual effort. Those who fail think they are held back by a pervasive if unconscious discrimination. Those who succeed are usually deemed the unworthy beneficiaries of parental privilege. While both discrimination and privilege must be examined on philosophical and sociological grounds, the worst way to educate children is to make the excuses and not the accomplishments the focal point of their formative years. We must avoid inculcating the culture of excuses which simply leads to a culture of failure.

All this is not to say that I am in sync with much of the modern talk on the just society. I think that the current preoccupation with positive rights – be it to a job, to housing, to medical care – lead in the end to fewer jobs, worse housing and inferior medical care. To address these broad political issues properly, however, it is necessary to consider how best to organise the means of production in society. A lot of powerful economic theory suggests that the most efficient system of production and exchange is pure competition in open markets; to the extent that state monopolies supply goods and services, you can count on the usual baleful results. These monopolies will generate too little by way of output and the charges for goods and services will be too high. When you add the fact that these are inefficient monopolists, to wit state officials who do not capture any residual returns from their activity, the outcome is going to be even worse.

But, however strongly I feel that the modern synthesis misapprehends these consequences and advances positions that have been falsified by everything that I have studied in law and economics, I do not want to take advantage of the classroom to push my views down the throats of the young. On the other hand, people whose positions on this matter are thoroughly discredited, at least as I see it, have no compunction about forcing their political views into the school curriculum. They are often not willing to treat what they see as political truths as contestable. To use their own bit of academic jargon, they treat their account of the world as though it is 'privileged' against all rivals,

which should therefore be rightly ignored in the classroom. The upshot is an unfortunate political disequilibrium between those, like myself, who believe passionately that it is a mistake to engage the very young in political indoctrination and those who have no such reluctance. One side is pushing forward with its substantive agenda, while the other side is holding back – hence the imbalance.

This particular tension is extremely difficult to resolve, but why does it arise in the first place? Let me leave ideology for a moment to take up what I think is the more difficult issue, which is the relationship of ideology to political structure. The key point is that the manner in which education takes place is greatly affected by the context in which it is provided.

Two models of education provision

Let us examine two models of education. One model starts from the bottom up: a group of parents gets together and they pay tuition to a school that agrees to provide services for their children. So universities, colleges, and schools are private firms organised along conventional competitive principles. One may ask whether this can succeed, and the answer is a resounding 'yes'. It is very noticeable in the United States that the greatest amount of educational choice at the most attractive prices is typically at the pre-school stage where there is no state organisation to drive out small players or to monopolise the industry.

In the bottom-up model, parents will withhold tuition and support if they do not like what the school provides. In a word, they will exercise their exit rights, and this threat means schools will work to please their clientele. Some concordance of interest will arise between schools on the one side and parents and their children on the other. It is not perfect but it is very powerful. It will be a competitive situation – not just an abstract notion – and children will realise this when their parents talk at the dinner table about whether or not they wish them to stay where they are or go to another school.

The other model of education runs from the centre. What typically happens is that exit options are no longer feasible. This is not only true in education, but in everything else in the world. So when one tries to find out why it is that the city of Chicago's public schools frequently fail in the education of their students, despite spending as much or more per child as the best private schools, the answer is excessive centralisation with layers of administrative control that greatly reduce the parental input. This top-heavy system also opens the door to monopoly structures, such as teachers' unions, which restrict innovation and responsiveness to parental concerns.

To be sure centralisation can guarantee a certain minimum standard of education: the power of taxation does wonders for failing institutions. But, at the same time as you create a low floor, you also create a very low ceiling. Given the costs involved, this strikes me as a very bad tradeoff for the overall system. So what must one do? I suggest that at this point general political ideologies really do matter, and that more choices must be introduced within the system. How could that take place?

The importance of school choice

Even within the framework of a state system, one modest reform is for school districts to ask parents whether they prefer child-centred education or teacher-centred education for their children. As professionals, school administrators would, of course, have to explain what the two approaches mean and involve. One of the things I suspect you would discover is that most teachers will put their own children into teacher-centred education. But whether that is right or wrong, the conscious creation of multiple tracks means that a state monopoly system is at last trying to introduce within its own ranks some elements of choice and competition.

In addition to choice within the state system, I think one has to develop a plan to ensure that people who organise schools outside the state will not be systematically cut off from state funds – which is, of course, the general problem that school vouchers address. These vouchers offer an even more powerful choice mechanism because parents no longer rely on a monopolistic provider but now search out schools that match their own preferences.

One of the important things that we have discovered in the United States with charter schools, voucher schools, private schools and home schooling is that the traditional curriculum of the 1950s still seems to work well today, even though we know much more about things like DNA and other new technologies than we did back then. So I think that the way in which one tries to meet the threat of ideology is not necessarily to engage in counter-ideological instruction, which I regard as a serious mistake particularly in education at the lower levels. Rather, once the structure by which education is offered is opened up, then the content of the instruction will change as well. More parents want for their children a mastery of the fundamental learning that leads to job skills and social development. Parents do not place their first emphasis on the current buzzwords of gender equity and deliberative democracy.

Once competition comes in, people can see for themselves whether or not the form of education that I received as a child, and which I defend today, is still desirable. Alternatively, parents could confound my expectations and decide independently to embrace the modern approaches to education. Or they could opt for some mixture that beats all traditional forms. It is very difficult to describe these different approaches in the abstract and to reach really strong conclusions about them. It is much better to put them to the test of the open market where the results are decided by informed consumers who are not only the parents but, at least in my household, the children as well. One great advantage of a voucher system is that people with different views on education can all go their separate ways. No political majority can impose its will on some isolated minority. It now becomes possible to agree to disagree. By allowing different educational experiments to go on simultaneously, you may get the information that will help resolve some of today's ideological debates without having to raise the decibel level to the point where no one can be heard at all.

QUESTIONS

Somebody once said that if Benjamin Franklin were to revisit the US education system, teaching would be the only occupation that he would find that hadn't changed. Any comment?

Well I think if that were true, it would be a terrible indictment. The question is what kind of changes do you want to make and why.

Let me just give you an illustration. When I learned mathematics as a child, there was always the constant impediment that calculations were very time consuming. But with pocket calculators, children are liberated from all of that work, and teachers can now separate the computation from the theory when teaching mathematics. Math books for my children are infinitely better than anything I had. When you give them a set of problems all the calculations can be easily and quickly solved. This is a transformation; the pocket calculator has forced teachers to rewrite every single math book.

You cannot even teach English tenses as they were taught in 1954, because the language itself has evolved. The future tense is not "I will go" but rather "I am going to go". A good teacher will constantly try to show how new elements, for example from foreign cultures, come in, influencing the way in which grammatical structures are formed, the way in which language is used, the style of speaking, and even influencing accents.

There are thousands of things going on which means that every year the set of materials that are available for instruction must change. My son Benjamin reads Batman, which was not around a few decades ago, and he does so intelligently. He is developing a critical culture about movies, about animation and so forth. I think good teachers pick up those passions of youth. Benjamin's teachers were very good at constantly relating Elizabethan drama to modern literary forms. The richness of Shakespeare is, of course, that no matter what modern situation you have anywhere in the world, there is always some Shakespearean parallel. If you cannot bring the classics alive, then you fail. It will not be the books that fail – they are great. And, of course, there are modern books that are also very profound.

One of the things that we talk about with our children is the sampling on lists – it is a great topic. You look at lists of the hundred greatest books or the hundred greatest movies. In the movie list you will see that most were made in the 1940s. Citizen Kane and Casablanca, made in 1941 and 1942, rank at the top. I asked Benjamin, my film critic, about these selections and he explained that the eminent film critics who drew up the list were all in their 50s and 60s and remembered these films from their youth. So now we have exposed a powerful unconscious selection bias, which teaches us a very sobering lesson. It is a lesson that came home to me because the films at the top of the list were the ones that I, being of that generation, would have listed.

It is a key element for success as a teacher to keep current by learning from your students, and if that does not keep you young and vital then the problem is with you and not with them. You have to be able to reach to the young in multiple ways, and if you just sit in the classroom and declaim to them from the past, you lose credibility.

This need for a variety of teaching approaches does not change when you get to the university. I have found this to be the case at law school. There are students who are not going to raise their hand in the middle of a class, but if they can catch you in the library stacks you may clear up in a couple of minutes a question that has been bothering them for hours. When I compare notes with the many primary and high school teachers that I know at the Laboratory Schools, the techniques they use sound very similar to the ones I use with my graduate students.

How do you get competition in education when it is controlled, certified and inspected by the state?

We have to get rid of 'by the state' in all those activities. It is going to require a momentous political debate in which we must ask whether or not the state has any comparative advantage in dealing with education. I think the answer to that question is 'no'. For example, in the United States we have examinations prepared by private providers. For a long time there was only one service that did it: the Educational Testing Service (ETS). But then some people said they did not think the ETS tests were the right kind of mix for the entire student body, and so the service started up a second set of tests which they now offer to schools.

I think you must try to break up this state monopoly power. However, a word of caution: you do not break that power by transferring it from a national monopoly to a local monopoly where students do not have any choice as to the school they attend. So I think you have to tell the Ministry of Education that its portfolio is too heavy. It should concentrate on its obligations to provide funding support for school education in order to offset income inequality, and leave the content provision to others.

Put otherwise, if funding is the reason for state intervention, then that ought to define the scope of that intervention, and the monies should be allocated by decentralised control agencies. The only way to adopt that system is by fighting against some very powerful ideological groups that embrace the centralist model of production, which applies the standard socialist model to education.

The trouble with the socialist model is that it does not work any better for education than it does for automobiles. Some people are going to argue that education is different from automobiles, a point you can readily acknowledge. The proper rejoinder is that these differences just reinforce the need for decentralisation in education. In any market with a high degree of variability in the goods and services demanded, as is surely the case with teachers and students in education, the notion that a centralised solution could

magically work when it fails for a mass-produced item like an automobile is nonsensical. You cannot run a responsive centralised system of education because the high level of individuation in the services required demands multiple providers.

In a decentralised environment, moreover, I think teachers would receive greater respect and dignity; they would have more responsibility for defining their tasks, and through that could rightfully claim greater moral authority than they have in the current system. By the same token, they would also be at greater risk. They would have to perform or they could find themselves out on the street.

Now I always find it very difficult to speak out against employment protection because I am a tenured member of a faculty who enjoys the protections of a lifetime contract. This is my partial response to my own situation. First, I am opposed to any extension by the state of my term of contract. More specifically, I oppose the legislative abolition of the mandatory retirement age and, in a declaration against self-interest, do not think that in my doddering old age I should be able to remain on the payroll of the university when it no longer wants to keep me. Secondly, there is a significant difference between university and school education. At universities we teach four to five hours per week, and can write and lecture outside the university the rest of the time. However, tenure does not protect academics from being ignored by the rest of world. This external check matters, because much of our income, both psychological and economic, depends upon the willingness of outside independent persons to hire us or to listen to what we have to say. Faculty members with big egos find themselves feeling pushed rather harder than the coddled vision of tenured faculty might suggest. Yet where the system does not work, we must rethink the nature of the employment contract in universities. How to do it is tricky because the governing structures in universities are rather different from those in schools. But the point I would stress is that no institution of which I am a part should be immune from criticism.

My own very brief acquaintance with New Zealand universities suggests that all is not well because large numbers of New Zealanders seem to go elsewhere after they acquire academic prominence. In other words, many able faculty members find the exit option more profitable and more attractive than the staying option. This emigration suggests that the domestic pay scales are insufficient, or that universities do not do a strong job in recognising differences in achievement when determining pay and conditions. One risk of an ideology of equal merit and worth is that it offers an open invitation for outsiders to pick off your strongest faculty.

These observations about New Zealand universities are not based on direct knowledge of their operation. But generally speaking, if able people are leaving the country you need to worry. Some may leave for individual reasons unrelated to pay. But when you see a systemic flow, it is not individual reasons but a structural flaw that you need to investigate. This openness to painful self-examination is something we need at every level of education.

You have made some compelling arguments, but I am concerned that you carry them too far. For example, the same people who are criticising education are also criticising scientists, many of whom rely on public money.

The public support for science rests, I think, on rather different grounds from the public support for education. The hope here is that the results of scientific research will fall into the public domain where they can be used by all. If that is true, then market mechanisms will not suffice because the return to the producer is no longer sufficient to justify the initial expenditure. A sensible programme of public support can arguably fill the gap.

But it hardly follows that one must take lockstep views on education and scientific research, given the different dynamics in the two fields. More generally, I think you are raising what we sometimes call the bundling versus the unbundling problem. The problem is that whenever you vote for a political party, you are choosing a pre-assembled package containing lots of items, some of which you like and some of which you do not like. I think that there is no necessary correlation between what you desire in education and what you want by way of environmental protection or public support for health care.

Political elections are always difficult because you are forced to vote for people whom you support on some issues but oppose on others. This is not exclusive to education; it is true of all political choices. Changing an entrenched system like education is very difficult because you may have to bring in collateral forces with whom you disagree on other issues. What that suggests at the very least is that you should reduce the number of activities undertaken through government, so that when people make their political choices there are fewer items in each bundle.

One of the comparative strengths of a market is that you can go to the firm that does what you like in education, but go to another firm for employment, to yet another for health care and so on. However, if you are talking about the provision of standard public goods, like highways or ambient air quality and so forth, you do not have the market option. Instead you have to think it through in the collective sector.

The other approach is a nonbundling approach. You try to target education and figure out if you could change the intellectual climate so that people and political parties, whatever they happen to be, will incline this way instead of that way on the issue. That could be accomplished through discussion sessions like this one, by publishing learned tracts, having debates in the media, having conferences and so on.

I am in favour of whatever method would work, so I do not try to prescribe methods. But I do think it is important in a debate that seems to be heavily centred on one side for the other side to be heard; you have to start a dialogue. Moving the sentiments of the centre of a political audience should have a profound effect on administrative policies. The world does not always make progress or suffer decline by radical changes. Hundreds of small decisions are made on a day-to-day basis; their overall direction can move one way or the other without any major policy decision.

One common point about modern administrative law is that law is frequently made by agencies rather than by elected officials. Thus if there is no alteration in the language of a statute, a change in personnel can introduce marked changes in attitudes and policy positions. Shifts in the climate of opinion can pave the way for these incremental changes. If slowly you inch in a direction that people thought would lead to disaster, they have an opportunity to revise their view if those first steps produce some improvement.

One trait that I prize in skilful people is the ability to work together on small projects with others with whom they have fundamental disagreements. Educators have to be opportunistic in the good sense of that word, taking advantage of small shifts in sentiment to push gradually in the direction you want to go. Over time you can make significant changes. What you cannot do is be dogmatic, defeatist or resentful.

It wasn't within your brief, but a basic issue is the purpose of education. Many of our curriculum documents suggest quite strongly that it is to provide for the economic welfare of the country, so there is an economic slant in education. But fundamental to much debate about education are differences between the participants in what they think the purpose of education should be.

I agree. My view is that education should seek to turn out able, intelligent and critical people with a strong set of skills developed wholly without regard to their future economic success. Ironically, that is the strongest possible preparation you could give people for their economic development. Schooling based on a very narrow set of vocational tools is the way to create mediocre people of no particular job flexibility.

Let me give you a law school illustration. Years ago, I was interviewing candidates for the Rhodes Scholarship, and a woman applicant told me that she was interested in horses and wanted to undertake a programme of law as it related to the horse. She said she wanted to go to law school in Louisville, the home of the Kentucky Derby, because they taught horse law. I told her in no uncertain terms to get the best and broadest legal education she could find. If she then decided that she was still interested in horse law, she could specialise in it, but if she had developed a fancy for oil and gas law, she could specialise in that in due course as well.

With the backing of a strong general education, the narrow vocational concerns will take care of themselves. Over and over again I tell my students that the most pragmatic students wisely suspend their pragmatic impulses. I think it also applies to other kinds of education. In effect I tell them to develop a powerful set of analytical tools that will help them achieve a set of ends that are not known today.

If you teach people how to get along, how to interact, how to cooperate on team projects and so forth, they will be well prepared to work in business and industry because they can function well with deadlines looming. They are also the same people who can undertake charitable activities in the voluntary sector. When I look at my own daughter and her friends, I see that the future titans of industry are the children who are organising programmes to help underprivileged inner city children resolve disputes without violence. Why? Because these youngsters have strong organisational skills and a clear

sense of mission. They will use their talents wisely because they are aware of their good fortune, and realise that it is good for them, as responsible citizens and individuals, to help those in need. It is no more complicated than that.

My wife always tells me that in her fund-raising activities, she never has trouble persuading business people of the importance of scholarships for poor kids and the need for a diverse pattern of student enrolment. It is the academics who are often more resistant. She explains that often it is people like myself who are second guessing the programme and trying to expose its imperfections to find an excuse not to contribute or to volunteer. It is really instructive to watch this rerun of the nineteenth century, in which the captains of industry were also the captains of social, cultural and charitable affairs. It is the same today – those who are really good at earning money turn out to be the ones who are really talented at giving it away.

So I think you should be cautious of overly pragmatic connections between education on the one hand and jobs and citizenship virtues on the other.