Educational Responses to the Unemployment Crisis

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A brief account of the nature of the economic crisis is presented as a context for the increasing levels of unemployment among young people and school-leavers. This situation is seen to lead to a legitimation crisis for schooling, where the transition to work is no longer a straightforward and unproblematic process. Three different educational responses to new problems and demands are presented as theoretical constructs leading to specific curricular initiatives in schools.

The Economic Crisis and Unemployment:

The crisis of unemployment is in itself a reflection of a compound set of factors, mainly economic in nature, but also arising out of a number of social and technological events. Among the latter we can mention the fact that smaller families, and labour-saving devices have freed many women from a proportion of the housework they were traditionally burdened with and made them available as full-time or part-time workers. This increase in labour supply has been accompanied by the technological revolution, where the widespread use of microprocessors has had, and will apparently continue to have adverse effects on employment outweighing positive effects resulting from a demand for new electronically-operated consumer goods. Despite conflicting arguments about the extent and nature of the aggregate loss of jobs, there is general agreement that the two opposing forces in the labour market, namely a decrease in labour demand, and an increase in labour supply, will continue to negatively affect the employment prospects of young people for quite some time.

There is plenty of evidence to show that the phenomenon of mass unemployment has affected youths most of all. A statistical analysis shows that whereas most countries in Western Europe have between 5% and 13% of their total labour force unemployed, between 45% and 65% of these tend to be young people of between fifteen and twenty five years of age. Malta is no exception, with statistics for September 1985 (**Quarterly Digest** of Statistics, 1986) indicating that 55% of the total number registering for work are under 25 years of age. There are many factors which play a **negative** influence on the chances of young people being employed. It would seem that in a time of economic difficulty, new entrants to the labour force are the first to be affected. There is often the presumption among employers that young people represent lower productivity in comparison with skilled adults. Employers might think of adults as being more reliable and responsible, with experience and skills already acquired, and therefore they do not have to incur the high costs of training young people for the job. Moreover, one has to take into account the displacement of workers by new technology together with structural changes within the workforce as a whole which reduce the demand for unskilled or low-skilled jobs. The increasing participation in the workforce by women also plays a significant part.

Another perspective, inspired by Marxist analysis, would emphasise the fact that as forms of labour, older workers have always been preferred to younger ones, whether in terms of technical agility, experience, work socialization or physical strength and dexterity. Before the 1970s employers were quite willing to recruit school-leavers because the adult labour supply was used up.

> The present youth unemployment reflects the situation in the labour market as a whole and the permanent availability of adult labour. Youth is therefore a form of the reserve army of labour, drawn on when needed, laid off when not.
>
> (Finn and Frith, 1981, p. 74).

Such an analysis of the structural position of youth in unemployment is important because, as will be discussed further on, the blame is often placed on the young unemployed themselves, or on secondary schooling in general for not equipping them with the "necessary skills". Thus, various educational responses to the unemployment crisis have the underlying assumption that if only these youths had to be better trained, if only they had learnt more vocational and life skills, then they would get employment. It is a personal deficit model that is advocated, where unemployment is seen to be caused by an individual lack of skill or knowledge.

To avoid this blame-the-victim approach, the source of unemployment has to be traced to national and international economic functioning. Thus, rising levels of inflation accompanied by increasing rates of unemployment caused consternation in economic policy-making as economists and governments strove to understand and control a situation not experienced before and extending beyond the realms of popular economic theory. What had been, in a period of economic expansion, a simple, straightforward link between increased

opportunity in schooling, and economic growth as a personal as well as a social goal now became problematic. Conventional wisdom had previously reinforced a meritocratic ideology where ability and effort led to attainment and an appropriate job, and failure was the result of deficiencies in the individual. A "good education" was the key to social mobility, or so it seemed:

> Until only a few years ago the transition of young people from school to working life was not a major problem for governments. Although the level and type of education and training provided was not always consonant with the needs of the economy, economic expansion was on such a scale that school leavers on the whole had little difficulty in finding a job that seemed appropriate to their educational achievement. By means of apprenticeship, on-the-job training or additional training, they were able to raise their initial qualifications. For the most gifted among them the requirements of an expanding economy opened up promotion and career prospects.
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> (OECD, 1977, p. 44).

Such a smooth and linear progression was however shattered by the crisis in employment to produce what Habermas (1976) has called a "legitimation crisis". Educational and occupational systems declare the need for motivation, but when the socio-cultural system fails to provide this motivation, in this case through its failure to provide employment, a motivational crisis, the basis of legitimation crisis, occurs. In many ways education lost its legitimacy not only with students who failed to get the "reward", in terms of job, they had striven for and been promised; it also lost its legitimacy with sections of the public and with governments.

In the 1950s and early 1960s education had been viewed as the key solution to the many dimensions of "development" - increased productivity, increased outcomes, improved health, reduced birthrate, the modernization of industry and agriculture, and the development of stable governments. By the mid-1970s however, disillusion with the results of investment in education and training had set in almost worldwide. Education was "blamed" for increased unemployment, reduced educational opportunity, a widening of the disparities in income - and much else besides.

The New Vocationalism:

In this situation, various groups emerged to generate "new" forms of discourse about education. A lot has been written about one key "event", the so-called "Great Debate" in education (for a definitive account, see Whitty, 1985) which initiated in Britain, but had definite parallels elsewhere. Weiner (1981) suggests that it is perhaps useful to see the Great Debate as one of a succession of attempts by the "industrial trainers" in Williams' (1965) typology to change the balance of the curriculum compromise in their favour.

Williams (1965) had earlier identified three different interests in the development of modern schooling. There were the "public educators" who argued that persons had a natural right to be educated. There were the "old humanists" who argued that a limited education in appropriate attitudes and habits - diligence, thrift, sobriety, deference to superiors, etc. - was necessary for social and political stability. Finally, the "industrial trainers" linked their concerns with those of the latter group to focus on the social character required by the work-place. Their views tended to predominate in determining the content of the elementary school curriculum and the method of pedagogy, with its emphasis on formal instruction requiring pupils to perform specified tasks within set periods of time determined by their teachers.

The "Great Debate" followed in the spirit of the "industrial trainers" in making demands for greater standardization of the curriculum to produce attempts to define and defend a core of "central" curriculum subjects. This has meant a return-to-basics program emphasizing literacy and numeracy, and a movement away from the more "progressive" education of the 1960s to prepare students better for a competition for a declining number of jobs. Thus, the supposedly peripheral subjects, or what their detractors often term the "frills", have come under scrutiny and attack not only in the U.K. (Whitty, 1985), but also wherever the crisis in capital accumulation took place, such as in the United States (Wexler et al., 1981), Australia (Dwyer et al., 1984) and New Zealand (Openshaw, 1980). Cathcart and Esland (1985) describe how in the U.K.,

> ... in spite of the rapid rise in youth unemployment in 1976, the right has succeeded in retaining the offensive against liberal education, has continued to promulgate the myth that young people (and their teachers) are responsible for their own unemployment, and, largely through the invoking of the economic survival, has begun the process of decomposition of elements of liberal education.
>
> (Cathcart and Esland, 1985, p. 178).

Apple (1982) sees this as a reflection of an old strategy:

> When larger economic and governmental crises erupt, export the crises outside the economy and government onto other groups. That is, rather than attention being directed towards the unequal results and benefits produced by the ways the economy is currently organized and controlled,

schools and teachers will be focussed upon as major causes of social dislocation, unemployment, falling standards of work, declining productivity, and so on.

(Apple, 1982, p. 27).

As Carnoy (1977) has pointed out, it is much easier to address youth and education and blame them for unemployment, rather than look at its source. Redressing the economy is not easy!

A recent chapter of the "Great Debate" is an increasing emphasis to make schooling more responsive to the needs of industry, creating what various authors (Gleeson, 1984; Bates et al., 1984; Dale, 1985) are calling the "new vocationalism", and hinging around the idea that the provision of continued in-school, and new post-school training and education programmes will provide: a much closer link between schooling and work, a more highly skilled, flexible and adaptable workforce, less unemployment as young people choose training rather than work, more opportunity for all young people as they become more highly trained and better able to make choices about work, and help disadvantaged groups as these can be targeted for special assistance.

Grubb (1985) discusses at length the attraction of vocationalism, and throws light on its revival after its demise in the more egalitarian 1960s.

Vocationalism is powerful because it appeals to many groups, especially in its more general forms. It gains support from students in search of jobs; businesses in search of trained workers; education in seach of students and an important social function; and politicians in search of popular reforms that appear to address social and economic problems. The power of vocationalism also comes from its ability to serve several contradictory roles of education simultaneously. It promises to reward individual students while still addressing more collective goals like unemployment and national development, and to use public resources in support of collective goals while still mobilizing them for the private ends of businesses and individual students. It can prepare students for an increasingly differentiated set of occupations while still allowing a common core of knowledge and values. It promises equality of opportunity through education within unequal societies where the pressures to reproduce inequality are even greater. Given a continuing dualism in thinking about human capacities and therefore about education, vocationalism promises to serve simultaneously the "hand" and the "mind", the practical and the abstract, the vocational and the academic.

(Grubb, 1985, pp. 547-548)

Carnoy and Levin (1985) and Apple (1986) among others show that similar dynamics and priorities gained currency in the United States. The social and educational thrust of the 1950s and 1960s had been towards equality and other democratic ideals. As long as the economy grew steadily, rising levels of taxation to support the achievement of those ideals were viewed as a necessary cost of prosperity. With the onset of lower growth rates, inflation, and faling real wages in the 1970s, however, the coalition of diverse groups supporting the egalitarian dynamic decomposed into divisive groups fighting for decreasing resources. This conflict enabled opponents of the social, racial, and gender gains to assert their agenda.

Apple (1986) shows that as elsewhere, the charge to the school to make US industry competitive again through the increased rigour of education and training became prominent. Various reports were issued, with two becoming especially important in terms of national sponsorship and dissemination. "A Nation at Risk" and "Action for Excellence" argued that much of the economic malaise of the nation was attributable to its educational weaknesses and recommended specific reforms for raising educational standards. The terrain of the debate thus shifted from a concern with inequality and democratisation which had characterised the previous decades, to the language of efficiency, standards and productivity. The reports thus see that a large part of the solution of the crisis is to address the lack of high technology industries by making schools and their curricula more responsive to industrial and technological needs.

In Europe too vocationalism became a new focal point of interest. Two major projects organised first by the Council of Europe's Council for Cultural Co-Operation (1979-1982) entitled "Preparation for Life" and then the European Community (1976-1980; 1983-1986/87) entitled "Action Programme: Transition of Young People from Education to Adult and Working Life" served to focus attention on the relationship between education and work. The former project reported on curricular experiments for "preparation for work" in ten of the Council's member states, and came up with recommendations. Declarations of policy in this regard were made by various ministers of the member states, linking education to economy even more officially.

The second project was especially influential as it involved hundreds of schools and training institutes in thirty areas of Europe, including the U.K. (cf. Wilcox et al., 1984; Varlaam, 1984). Moreover, an international information network was professionally set up by IFPLAN, so that thousands of

teachers could use the data collected. Curriculum endeavours which linked education to industry were highlighted, and included the development of work experience schemes, of careers guidance, of "education for enterprise", of co-operation and partnership with local or regional industries, and the development of alternative curricula. (cf. European Community, 1984 and 1985).

The "Critical" Educators

Another group of educationalists have responded differently to the crisis, and placed themselves squarely in opposition to the views expressed within official documents of the state. They regard the "new vocationalism" as fulfilling a control function which schooling has been called on to provide with the breakdown of the meritocratic ideology. Thus, in analysing the nature of the current crises, Sharp (1984) suggests that in a situation of large-scale unemployment allied to a world competitive economy, governments face a crisis. On the other hand, they have to attempt to socialise and occupy the potential unemployed so that this group is not a threat to the state (and education is obviously a prime instrument for this); on the other hand, in the interests of economic competitiveness, they have to restrict spending on education. To accomplish this, Sharp suggests, governments in all western capitalist countries are drawn to make education more efficient and more directly instrumental in producing appropriate skills and attitudes. At the same time however, they are also attempting to divert attention from the processes at work by substituting rhetoric about standards, basic skills, vocational training, accountability for previous concerns with equal opportunity, child-centred progressivism, and liberal education.

Other authors from within the "new" sociology of education, closely linked to a neo-Marxist interpretation of society, have developed similar views. Carnoy and Levin (1985), Apple (1986) and Finn (1982) among others, have criticised the "high-tech" solution to the crisis, where the needs of industry take precedence over the needs of democracy. Giroux (1985), reacting to the various national reports in the U.S.A. which have created a "new consensus" appealing to principles of industrial efficiency, control, and administration as central theoretical elements in developing school programmes, links the crisis in education to the crisis in democracy:

> The real crisis in education is one that, in part, stems from the failure of this society to develop a public philosophy that is capable of defending schools as public spheres committed to performing a public service informed by emancipatory and democratic principles. The important point being that it has become increasingly difficult within the boundaries of advanced capitalist society to be able to think in terms *not* tied to the principles of economic self-sufficiency and individual attainment.
>
> (Giroux, 1985, p. 61)

Giroux, like other critical educators from the Left, argues for a view of public education that takes as its starting point, not the privatistic, technical, and narrow economic interests that currently define the debate on public education, but the relat define the debate on public education, but the relationship of schools to the demands of active forms of community life. Schools are therefore to be seen as places that prepare people for a democracy, and not simply the workplace. Attention is also called on those repressive material conditions of school life embodied in hierarchical school structures, the unequal resources that separate poor from affluent schools, and the tracking and sorting systems that cut short the futures and dreams of so many youth from subordinate groups. An attack is made on what Giroux (1985, p. 61) calls the "structured silence" regarding those ideological conditions in public education that make invisible the histories, knowledge forms, and social relations of excluded majorities while simultaneously legitimating dominant middle class nd ruling class cultures and social practices. A reconstruction of public education would thus begin with the imperative to awaken the moral, political and civic responsibilities of all learners.

From this perspective, the agenda for schools would not be to produce what Cathcart and Esland (1985) have called the "compliant-creative" worker needed by modern industry. The liberal humanism of the 1950s and 1960s is not to be substituted by a version of social and economic Darwinism where enterprise and the possession of skills for "technological capability" are the dominant values. Rather, this perspective advocates the need for schools to examine the "what" and the "how" of the curriculum with an emphasis on demystifying academic study and providing knowledge for all students which would enable them to negotiate and change the economic, social and political systems which affect their lives.

This perspective builds on the gains made by the liberal humanism of the previous decades and extends it into the social sphere. It sees individual initiative in its social context, and sees the quest for social justice and critical development of the culture in social terms. It requires not only an understanding of work and of the ideas of our culture as essential, but also the idea of power: students come to understand how power is used in society, both in the arrangements of economic processes and also in the arrangement of everyday social life itself (ideology).

From such a perspective, Simon (1983) turns the "new vocationalism" on its head, and by making "adult life", "society", the "real world", the "world of work" not as taken-for-granted realities but as the subject of inquiry, where the world is continually being produced and reproduced by the actions of men and women, and often (as Marx said) on terms not their own making. Simon thus argues:

> If the realities of the workplace are indeed sets of social relations defined through power and in support of particular interests, to present them as if they were naturally occurring phenomena, historically neutral and obviously necessary, is to mystify people and to act to render them powerless. By helping people solely to adapt to "what is", you help to maintain what is.

(Simon, 1983, p. 238)

Such an agenda is important, especially when seen in the light of research in the U.K. (Cathcart and Esland, 1985; Rees and Atkinson, 1982) and in the U.S.A. (Lind-Brenkman, 1983) which shows that schools generally present an idealised view of industry, and the pedagogical materials presented by teachers generally enjoin them to foster an understanding (i.e. acceptance) of the "wealth creation" process and a recognition that industrial growth, consumerism and new technology are synonymous with progress. Korndorffer (1986) therefore argues for an education which puts knowledge and power over their own learning into young people's hands, an education which supplies young people "with the hammer of a materialist understanding of their world and its history that would enable *them* to work together to change that world." (p. 140).

The Rhetorical Humanists

Another identifiable group who share some perspectives from both the other groups described above (i.e. those supporting a "new vocationalism" and those in opposition to this) place a greater emphasis on the need to prepare youth for increasing amounts of leisure time. Those who write from this perspective point out to the benefits of unemployment in that at last education can be "freed" from its utilitarian functions and be geared more steadfastly and singlemindedly on personal development and fulfillment (Musgrave, 1977). Generally speaking, proponents from this perspective ally themselves to the social and life-skills-type of education as formulated by Hopson and Scally (1981), but fail to look beyond this to consider in any depth the ways in which society is structured to put some groups into positions of power and privilege. It also fails to address in any realistic way the effect of the "broken transitions" unemployment has brought about, so well described by Willis (1986). Arguments in favour of education for leisure tend to be tinged with an idealistic humanism which has not been soiled by the daily hardship many of the unemployed face. An example of this perspective can be found in Sweet (1981):

> The future generations should realise that their education is for cultural appreciation, work and leisure and that at some time in their lives, they will probably not be gainfully employed and that this period of time can be enriching, that is challenging, enjoyable and purposeful.

(Sweet, 1981, p. 57)

Such notions have been rejected by educators from the right (Deforge, 1981) and from the Left (Offe, 1985) who see it as a deflection from the real issues which makes no attempt to enable youth to understand and control the events which affect their lives. Offe (1985) finds three major problems with "leisure education" and related suggestions of the "do-it-yourself" type activities which often consume more earned income than they help to save. Offe enumerates the difficulties, which

> ...have to do with problematic distribution effects which typical households or individuals can overcome **only** within very strict limits and to a highly variable degree. The scope actually available for "autonomous" activities is typically constrained, first, by a shortage of material resources (such as physical space and other facilities); second, by a lack of personnel qualifications, discipline and psychological dispositions, and finally, by the absence of institutional structures which could guarantee minimum levels of efficiency and continuity, as well as security of expectations and control among their participants.

(Offe, 1985, p. 95)

Offe therefore rebuts euphoric references to the beauty of "freely chosen activity" or to the bliss of "self-exploitation" (Dahrendorf, quoted in Offe, 1985, p. 96) which are currently finding favour with West German Social Democrats, and concludes that people have to be provided with the appropriate institutional and material resources which would *enable* them to carry out their self-chosen activities. Any other solution would likely "amount only to a camouflaging of the violence, misery and hopelessness of an economy of lifeboats, in which there would always be too few seats." (Offe, 1985, p. 95). Bassett (1984) has also pointed out that the notion of leisure involves some concept of freedom and choice, and must consequently exclude overtones of oppression or coercion. For, "despite the claims of some that our society is on the edge of a new social ethic in which 'full employment' will cease to be a major priority, there is little doubt that in the present circumstances the penalties for failure to gain entry to the workplace are as severe as they have ever been." (Dwyer et al., 1984, p. 8).

Summary of Curricular Implications

Within this categorization of educational responses to an economic crisis, it is easier to "unpack" the various meanings and assumptions underlying different curricular initiatives evident in the educational scene. Some of these major initiatives are briefly described below:

(a) Initiatives within the "new vocationalism" perspective

(1) "Work Experience" programmes, where the main aim is school students for work. Key words here would be learning the "right" attitudes, including obedience and respect for the employer. There is little or no education about workers' rights and trade unionism.

(2) "Transition Programmes" within secondary schools. These can have various structures, but are generally based on a "Preparation for Life" curriculum (cf Wilcox et al, 1984) where emphasis is on coping skills, and various other social and life skills. Examples of these would be budgeting skills, job interview techniques, handling relationships, etc.

(3) Enterprise education, such as the SPIRAL project in Ireland, where businessmen and entrepreneurs co-operate with teachers to train young students in the skills of founding small businesses.

(4) The notion of "alternance education" which has been gaining currency in France and other European countries, and which involves the alternation between periods at school and periods at work.

(5) Specific vocational skills education, often for low-achieving students, such as the recent TVEI (Technical and Vocational Education Initiative) in the U.K.

(6) Post-compulsory school training, where structures like Britain's YOP (Youth Opportunity Scheme) contain and control large numbers of unemployed school-leavers, who accept to undergo skills-training in the hope that this will lead to a job.

(b) Initiatives within the "Critical Education" Perspective

(1) Political and economic education which will lead students to understand the societal structures and arrangements influencing their lives. Such an understanding also leads to the diminishing of the feelings of powerlessness accompanying the loss of the wage. Students are moreover encouraged to participate in the democratic process to influence their own destinies.

(2) Work experience type programmes are encouraged as long as they are used to conscientise students to the structures and the relations of production. The emphasis is on "education" rather than "training", and on teaching *about* work rather than *for* work. Work experience and alternance education are seen as useful pedagogical tools which bring the school and the community into closer contact and lead to a unified rather than fragmented approach to knowledge. Such projects are also invaluable sites for inquiry-based learning and teaching, where students are active co-producers of knowledge rather than passive recipients. Such programmes are also used to educate in progressive ideas regarding work, such as worker participation in decision-making and democracy on the workplace.

(4) The issue of the disadvantaged location of women, those from lower socio-economic backgrounds and from minority groups (ethnic or otherwise) in a segmented labour market is given central importance in a curriculum from this perspective. The inequities are not only addressed, but students are taught ways of overcoming the structural disadvantages in the particular society they live in.

(3) Critical education is closely linked to social beliefs and priorities. Thus, it encourages notions of the right to a "citizen wage", and democratic concepts of work-sharing. It also attacks the myth of the "dole-bludger", locating the loss of work in the appropriate spheres of political and economic decisions rather than in an unwillingness to work on the part of the unemployed. Critical education also makes statements about the priority of human values over corporatist and capitalist interests of rationalization and profit-making.

(c) Initiatives within the "Rhetorical Humanist" perspective:

(1) Since unemployment is here to stay, then schools are absolved of the need to be responsive to the needs of industry. They can therefore concentrate on "true" education in terms of "personal development" and "growth". Of major importance would be "leisure education", which helps the non-working citizen to make constructive use of the free time available.

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