

Educational social policy: part 1

In the UK educational policy from 1870 to the present day has been introduced for three broad reasons;

1. For reasons of **economic efficiency** – it is believed that a well-trained workforce will produce an effective economy that can compete with other modern economies. We will call this reason '**the vocational or economic approach**'
2. In the 1940s, an approach known as the '**social democratic**' view became dominant. This argued that too much talent was being wasted by the educational system because **schools failed to make the most of the potential intelligence and skills of working-class pupils who often left schools with no qualifications whatsoever**. This social democratic approach argued that British education needed to provide '**equality of opportunity**' in education.
3. In the 1980s and 1990s the vocational or economic approach was superseded by an emphasis on '**marketisation**' – the idea that education like any other consumer product (for example, cornflakes and baked beans) could be advertised, marketed and sold to parents and pupils. It was believed by those, mainly Conservative politicians and thinkers who championed this approach that **schools should act like businesses** and this would make them more efficient and less wasteful of both money and pupil talent.

Educational policy generally refers to **the collection of laws and rules introduced by governments that govern the operation of educational systems**. Until 1870, the British government did not involve itself with the provision of education. The only education provided for children up to 1879 was provided for children from traditionally affluent families (mainly found in the aristocracy) by the **fee-paying public schools** (these are actually private schools despite being called '**public schools**'). The most well-known of these are Eton College (founded by Henry VIII), Harrow, Winchester, Rugby (at which the game of rugby was invented) and Charterhouse. Private schools for primary-age children are known as '**prep schools**'. Children whose middle-class parents were reasonably well-off sent their children to **fee-paying grammar schools**. Children from poorer families might have received a basic education in literacy and numeracy from church schools. Even these charged a few pence despite the fact that younger children were likely to be taught by older children. However the vast majority of children received no education at all -which is unsurprising because most working-class children were in some form of waged work.

The first significant piece of educational social policy introduced in the UK was **Forster's 1870 Education Act** which introduced **mass elementary education** to be provided by **local education boards** – (paid for by the new Department of Education) Elementary education mainly refers to primary and junior education – in most places in the UK, this meant education up to the age of 11 years and sometimes to 14 years). If you look at the dates above the doors of old primary and junior schools, you will see that most are built between 1870 and 1890. Some schooling continued to be provided by the churches under local authority supervision, hence Church of England and Catholic schools.

The 1870 Act was significant for two reasons;

- It signalled for the first time that the state or government was willing to take economic responsibility for the education of all children in the UK (except for those who opted out into the private educational system).
- The introduction of mass elementary **education reflected political fears that Britain's economic rivals, particularly the USA and Germany were on the verge of becoming more economically powerful than Britain because their workforces were more literate, numerate and efficient.** Up to the 1870s Britain was the leading industrial power in the world but its economic and industrial supremacy was being challenged by the rapid progress being made by the American and German economies which was thought to be partly due to the fact that both these countries had introduced free mass education systems. It was believed that the economies of both these countries has been improved by the fact that their workforces were more literate and numerate, and therefore more flexible and effective than British workers who were largely unable to read or count. Forster argued that the 1870 Act would eventually improve the economic performance of British workers.

Two other facts are worth noting.

- The 1870 Act was not introduced for philanthropic reasons, that is, to improve the economic conditions of working-class people, although it probably did have this effect in the long-term because education does improve access to better-paid jobs.
- The 1870 Act did not introduce free education – parents were initially expected to contribute a few pence to their children's education. However, this was not successful. Many working-class parents did not cooperate by sending their children to school which is not surprising considering that many such families lived on the breadline and relied on the extra wages

brought in by their working children. The relative failure of the first few years of the 1870 Act resulted in **1880 Education Act** which made education compulsory until the age of 10 years. It also made it illegal for parents not to send their children to school. They could be prosecuted in a court of law if they did not ensure attendance. This is, of course, still the case today.

The **Elementary Education (School Attendance) Act of 1893** extended compulsory education until the age of 11 years. It also extended the right to education to deaf and blind children. In 1899 the school leaving **age** was increased again to 13. In **1891, elementary schooling became free.**