

Should the Debate About Compulsory Schooling Be Reopened? A Fully Semiotic Perspective

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INTRODUCTION

I take it that (a) compulsory, formal schooling, undertaken well, may be both a private and a public good overall; (b) such schooling is so much an integral part of our social organization that its continuation is in any case ensured for the medium term; and (c) for many in developing countries, more provision of this sort can only be welcomed as an advance on present circumstances. This essay is not, therefore, a simple deschooling argument. Rather, it seeks to address the question of the desirable limits of compulsory, formal schooling by critiquing the all too easily held assumption (which does not follow from a–c) that it is an *unquestionable* social good, the more of which can be provided, the better. Is more schooling always more desirable, and if not, what criteria might be employed to ascertain its best extent? It is topical to reopen this question in the context of, among other things, recent debates about home-schooling in the United States and the United Kingdom's stated desire to increase the effective school leaving age from 16 to 18. Societies look toward schooling to address a range of perceived social deficits, yet it would be self-evidently absurd to assert that an entire life spent in school would be preferable to one in which schooling is limited. It is therefore necessary to address the second part of the question posed here, regarding the criteria that should be employed to ascertain the best extent of compulsory, formal schooling.

Based on both general liberal democratic concerns, including a commitment to progress and human rights, and dominant themes in educational debate, I suggest the following four candidate criteria:

1. The moral case: formal, compulsory schooling is morally justifiable and justified (that is, we have the right and the duty to impose it on people).
2. The empowerment case: formal, compulsory schooling produces a net learning effect for individuals (that is, one learns more from going to school than if one does not).
3. The economic case: formal, compulsory schooling results in a net economic gain for society (that is, people are better off overall for going to school than otherwise).
4. The equity case: formal, compulsory schooling results in a net social gain in terms of equity, equality of opportunity, or social cohesion (that is, society is fairer, more just, or more united as a result).

These criteria are not exhaustive; they might, for example, be expanded to include a "physical well-being case," though this is (perhaps surprisingly) less often considered than the criteria listed above. Criteria (1) and (2) are principally

concerned with private good, while criteria (3) and (4) relate primarily to public good. It is effectively impossible to test any of these criteria empirically; there can be no control groups, and innumerable contextual factors would intervene. However, given that there is broad consensus around the key terms in these criteria, at least in the liberal democratic world (there is little debate about whether a particular organization is a school or not, or whether Nazi Germany was equitable), a theoretically informed debate can be held on the issue of how far “more” schooling might be considered “better,” and under what conditions this might hold.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The present argument will approach these issues from the fully semiotic perspective developed elsewhere by the author, which is pragmatic and broadly Deweyan.¹ This perspective adopts a problematization of the sign-signal distinction in order to justify the assertion that all forms of living can be understood as semiotic in the broadest sense. The case rests on a thoroughgoing rejection of mind-body substance dualism and of its legacies in educational theory. Accepting, and arguably going beyond, John Dewey’s unified conception of body-mind, this perspective rejects the assumption that the sign-signal distinction is absolute.² Rather than conceiving of (minded) human beings as communicating via signs and nonminded (mechanical, brutish) animals and other lesser entities as merely responding to signals, this argument presents all living as engagement with “sign[al]s,” whether conscious or unconscious.³ It thus calls into question taken-for-granted assumptions in a number of areas, including the limits of the human, the nature of learning, and the nature of childhood.

I shall now attempt to apply this perspective to criteria (1) through (4).

THE MORAL CASE

Historically, compulsory schooling has by no means always been seen as morally desirable or even defensible. Whether it can now be seen as such depends largely on how childhood is construed.

It was not until the nineteenth century that compulsory schooling became associated with liberal or democratic values. Both John Locke and Jean-Jacques Rousseau, for example, opposed it.⁴ In Germany (then Prussia), mass compulsory education was developed from Lutheran roots; here is Martin Luther writing in 1524:

If the government can compel such citizens as are fit for military service...how much more has it a right to compel the people to send their children to school, because in this case we are warring with the devil, whose object it is secretly to exhaust our cities and principalities of their strong men.⁵

By 1560, Lutheran compulsory attendance had been inaugurated in Württemberg, though it was not until 1763 that schooling was made compulsory for Prussian children between five and thirteen, and it was not until 1794 that all schools and universities were made institutions of the state. Johann Gottlieb Fichte stated that schools “must fashion the person, and fashion him in such a way that he simply cannot will otherwise than what you wish him to will.”⁶ This model quickly spread

to Austria and then throughout Europe. It was in Calvinist New England that compulsory schooling first arrived in America.

If there is now a moral justification for compulsory schooling that goes beyond the protection of children from abusive backgrounds, defense against the devil, or the creation of compliant citizens, it is not widely disseminated or discussed. This may be, at least in part, because the category “child” is taken to imply a group of beings not yet ready to make decisions for themselves, but even if this characterization is accepted, it does not necessarily imply that the state should be the agent of such decisions, nor does it justify the particular decision to make them attend school.

Late-modern conceptions of childhood remain heavily indebted first to Aristotle, and then to more recent influences on the Aristotelian heritage: I have suggested elsewhere that these influences can be summarized as Puritanism, Liberalism, and Romanticism.⁷ Aristotle’s view is that the child is not yet fully human because she is not yet able to carry out a fully adult role as a citizen; the Puritan, or extreme Protestant, view is that the child is corrupt and in urgent need of guidance toward devotion and hard work if she is to have any chance of saving her soul (this is the Lutheran view mentioned previously); the Liberal view is that the child is innocent at birth, with an innate rational faculty that can only work on sense data in the “real world,” which makes the child highly receptive to education and correct training on the way to becoming a free adult (this is the Lockean view); and the Romantic view of the child is as innately superior to the adult, so that the purpose of education is to allow her to develop her natural abilities as far as possible before making contact with a corrupt and demeaning world (this is the view of Rousseau). All of these views, I argue, are elements in the sometimes confused ways in which we think about children, and their education, today. The three more recent influences are “footnotes to Aristotle” insofar as the overriding view of the child as qualitatively very different from the adult remains: either the child is seen as insufficiently developed for immersion in society or (on the Romantic account, still popular among child-centered educators) as too good for it. Although this overriding view has been questioned by those inclined to more postmodern perspectives (noting Neil Postman’s depiction of the “adult-child”⁸), its assumptions remain implicit in mainstream debates around schooling.

The Aristotelian conception of the child as potential rather than actual citizen assumes, as Aristotle and Plato did, that the child is not yet rational, yet this assumption in turn rests on a belief in an absolutist conception of rationality that is not empirically dependent. Though this belief is more Platonic than Aristotelian, Aristotle did not move as far from Plato’s position as a modern rationalist would be inclined to do.⁹ To take a recent example, Michael Luntley is inclined to define rationality in terms of “whatever we do that puts our lives in order.”¹⁰ Bearing in mind this controversial but scarcely deniable relationship between rational power and experiential autonomy, it is pertinent to note that children can only attend school when they are sufficiently independent to function away from their parents. Indeed, all children of school age and, indeed, many young adults are independent

physically, largely independent socially, and yet dependent financially — and it might be argued that ever-increasing time spent in formal education serves to increase rather than to reduce the period of financial dependency.

A fully semiotic account of the child will move even farther from Plato and Aristotle than Luntley. If children are as much semiotic engagers as are adults, then to respond rationally is merely to respond in a way considered rational; rationality is not, therefore, a discrete function. While there remains a sense in which the child is less than the adult, or represents adult potential, the power of this explanation is thus significantly diluted. It is not so much that children cannot or do not rationalize but rather that their limited experience of the world renders their rationalizations more naïve than those of adults, in terms of both process and content; they are less adept at the form of life referred to as rationalizing. While on the one hand this calls for a degree of protection for children, on the other it begs a number of questions. Is compulsory school the best preparation for a life outside school, experience of which has been denied (in the absence of belief in a strong theory of mental readiness)? Also, are the run of adults really more rational in their decisions than children as a result of attending school (in the absence of belief in absolute rationality)? If children already respond to life as fully as adults, and if thought is merely one form of response, then any moral justification for schooling must be on a different ground from the Aristotelian.

THE EMPOWERMENT CASE

A key educational inference from a view of living as semiotic engagement is that there cannot be a distinct qualitative state of “learning.” That is to say, either all living is learning (since all response produces some change and response never ceases), certain activities are deemed learning activities simply because (for example) they lead to examinations or take place in classes (regardless of whether they effect richer personal change than other activities), or certain experiences are judged to have been learning experiences only retrospectively.¹¹ On these grounds, no fully convincing case can be made for school as either the source of learning or as enhancing the capacity to learn. Rather, schooling channels activity and thereby offers certain opportunities for learning while excluding others. It does not teach us how to learn, though it may introduce us to certain ways of making sense that we would not encounter outside of it. Against what we learn from attending school, therefore, we would have to balance what we might have learned by not attending, unless the discussion is foreclosed on the grounds that activity at school — and solely this activity — counts as learning activity. As what we might have learned by not attending school remains unknowable, no claim that schooling increases the net learning of individuals can be justified. While it is much easier to justify the claim that certain kinds of socially validated knowledge and skills (such as literacy, numeracy, and scientific thinking) are imparted largely in schools, they could be imparted elsewhere.

An adherent to a fully semiotic position may be sympathetic to Ludwig Wittgenstein’s account of learning as “knowing how to go on”: “Try not to think of understanding as a ‘mental process’ at all. — For that is the expression which

confuses you. But ask yourself: in what sort of case, in what kind of circumstances, do we say, ‘Now I know how to go on...’¹² On Wittgenstein’s account here, there seem to be two necessary conditions for learning, which taken together are sufficient: exposure to practices and a willing subject. Although the key to successful learning is engagement, rather than some psychological chimera such as motivation, if I am in a situation against my will, I may engage in the practice in question as little as I can — and will certainly not exclaim with satisfaction afterward: “Ah! Now I know how to go on!” From this perspective, compulsion is an antieducational force that is likely to reduce rather than enhance the capacity of schooling to teach.

Against this perspective, some may argue that schooling can be seen to increase academic standards.

A centrally led education policy based on measurable academic benchmarks and output targets rests on certain assumptions including (a) that the output measures are valid and reliable: they measure what they purport to measure (and what is most important to measure) and the standards are consistent across place and time; and (b) that the outcomes are more or less equally valid for all who achieve them.¹³

Regarding (a), the most commonly cited output measures are test results. These can only act as proxies for full competence, for a test can only focus on a section of a subject; must relate to the school syllabus, which is itself a selection from a disciplinary tradition; can only “test” certain kinds of knowledge, skills, and understanding; tends to focus on well-established aspects of a subject rather than that which is new or controversial; and “tests” certain attributes that are not subject specific, including (for example) memory, writing skill, and time management. The repeating of testing across large populations and across long periods of time raises further issues, specifically of reliability. Students can be helped to prepare for tests to varying degrees, both in terms of long-term advantage (home, school, and cultural background) and in terms of immediate help (from peers, teachers, parents, and others). These factors are accentuated where examination is by coursework. Then there is a tendency for “credential inflation” over time as “pass rates” increase. Though this inflation is partly attributable to teacher professionalism, this is unlikely to account for all the variation in pass rates. If a syllabus or a test is to be seen as successful, it will have to result in increased pass rates each year, as the system “settles down” with students and teachers alike. So, while individuals may remain committed to the maintenance of standards, the forces producing “drift” are strong. A falling pass rate on any test would be a serious cause for concern, for providers at all levels — and, indeed, this happens rarely.

No testing system can be totally valid and reliable, and will always, therefore, be an imperfect proxy for educational success, broadly understood. Furthermore, regarding (b), there is no mechanism to ensure that all students put the same value on one particular qualification as they do on another; indeed, society demands variety and specialization, and is not organized on the basis of homogeneity of interests or total equivalence of skills. Similarly, there is no mechanism that can prevent employers from valuing students of certain personality types, or from

certain schools and colleges, over others. Taken together, these considerations problematize the empowerment case, though they do not necessarily undermine it, as long as “learning” is understood as induction into socially valued practices, rather than fetishized.

THE ECONOMIC CASE

Given the unfeasibility of extended discussion of empirical data, this section will be limited to a few general remarks.

Overall, while it is easy to show a correlation between the extent of formal, including compulsory, education and the economic success of nations, it cannot be inferred that the former causes the latter. While many of the skills employed to drive economic growth are derived, in whole or in part, from school, neither are they all derived from school, nor does individual school success clearly determine financial success, nor is it inconceivable that such skills could be learned outside compulsory school. Relevant to the penultimate point, recent data from the UK and elsewhere continue to suggest that graduates earn more than nongraduates. However, there are several ways of measuring this, and the fact that a degree “pays” in one context does not automatically entail its paying in another. Logically, there must come a point at which returns diminish, as a wholly graduate population would have no comparators. While not necessarily presupposing a diminishing net return for society, this point raises a number of issues concerning mass and élite education, in relation to the value of degrees and other qualifications as scarce goods. In short, it may suggest that insofar as education drives growth, either it may do so because of achievements at the top end rather than among the population as a whole (or among some other part of the population only), or it is not enough on its own to do so, even though there is a general effect. Either way, there are reasons to doubt whether ever-increasing formal education will lead to ever-increasing prosperity. It might also be added that the worlds of school and work are often highly dissimilar, thus throwing into question the value of the former as preparation for the latter.

THE EQUITY CASE

It is with respect to notions of equality of opportunity that modern liberals (excluding libertarians) incline toward approval of compulsion in education where classical liberals did not. For Locke, individual strength of character was more important than perceived equality of opportunity, while current educational discourse tends to emphasize the reverse. Where the policy debate is predominantly concerned with issues such as the proportion of eleven-year-olds reaching average or “expected” standards in literacy and numeracy, and the disparities in educational achievement between rich and poor, compulsory schooling can be seen as a benign means of social reform. This position begs several questions concerning conceptions of equality of opportunity and the capacity for formal education to address them. If (a) the issues of equality of opportunity reflect agreed-upon social aims, and (b) compulsory education is an unquestionable social good, then increasing compulsory education should gradually serve to tackle the issues. If, however, under these conditions increasing compulsory education does not tackle the issues, then the grounds for the increase can be questioned.

“Equality of opportunity” is a compound policy term that enjoys wide, if often tacit, support. Nevertheless, Norman Fairclough has pointed out that the “ambivalence potential” of a term like “equality of opportunity” is important in policy formulations designed to maximize public response.¹⁴ Policies in democracies have to appeal to the maximal number of potential voters, which means that they have to aim to attract support from those with differing orientations. “Opportunity,” in ordinary language, relates to subjective judgment and experience; individuals have opportunities. “Equality,” on the other hand, refers to objective, transpersonal measurement of people’s treatment of others, whether linked to an ethical virtue (such as respect) or a material condition (such as income). On this account, “equality of opportunity,” as a slogan, does not amount even to a policy, let alone to a means of enacting it.

One particular problem concerns whether opportunities can be provided. Certainly, goods and services can be made available to people, and even made compulsory for them, but this does not determine whether the recipients of the goods and services will respond positively to them or whether they will act sensibly on receipt of them. This problem becomes more acute when people have not chosen to receive the goods and services in question, and thus have not formulated either a reason for receiving them or a plan of what to do with them once they are received. This is likely to be the case for many children in school who are mature enough to have aspirations, but receive instruction against, or irrespective of, their wills. They might find, of course, that they enjoy studying regardless, but this will happen only if the teaching is responsive to their existing interests, aspirations, and attainments, which is difficult to achieve in a context of standardized content and instruction. Even where the children’s attitudes are positive, a fully semiotic perspective on learning stresses that the contexts for response always differ, as a result of which “whatever our students learn cannot be exactly what we teach.”¹⁵

At the simplest, purely formal, legal level, equality of opportunity merely “requires that positions and posts that confer superior advantages should be open to all applicants” within a particular legal domain.¹⁶ A commitment to ensuring that all people (or as many as possible) are in the position to apply for the advertised post in the first place requires a more substantive commitment to equality of opportunity. This raises problematic issues for formal education. At one extreme, libertarians such as Robert Nozick and Richard Epstein regard equality of opportunity as the condition under which people are as free as possible to pursue their private interests, regardless of inequalities of outcomes.¹⁷ By contrast, John Rawls’s notion of “equality of fair opportunity” assumes that children of equal natural talent should be equally equipped to aspire to, and apply for, the vacant post notwithstanding inequalities of background.¹⁸ In effect, Rawls requires education to create a classless society, which demands a social policy that wrests control from (for example) parents and turns it over to (for example) schools. Even then, this kind of social policy rests on a questionable assumption about native talent, and there is no effective commitment to equalities of outcome. Furthermore, it is unclear how differences in desert should be handled; again, differences in apparent effort might

be explained by external factors. Thoroughgoing outcome egalitarians will seek a system that ensures that no one is disadvantaged in the end, but this requires extreme intervention and the denial of, or compensation for, any private sphere in which advantage can be conferred.

In effect, the greater the commitment to a substantive notion of equality of outcome, the more centralized educational provision must be, and the less individual freedom can be tolerated. Yet even among those with a very strong commitment to such a notion, policy prescriptions will vary. A supporter of affirmative action may recommend increased funding, and even a modified curriculum, for the least privileged in order to counteract broader social inequalities, while others may insist on equal treatment of all at the school level as in all other contexts. Yet others might argue that society as a whole needs elite schools just as sports need elite teams.¹⁹ Several authors have committed to a “level playing field” conception, whereby equality of opportunity is inextricably linked to distributive justice and requires large-scale redistribution of wealth from rich to poor,²⁰ but even this commitment does not offer any firm prescription for the conduct or extent of compulsory schooling.

As Richard Arnesen puts it, “debates about the seemingly banal norm of equality of opportunity reveal profound disagreements as to the nature of fair terms of cooperation in the modern world.”²¹ David Corson has written of the “secondary elaborations of belief” that render political policies so difficult to enact consistently in education.²² All the stakeholders in our schools may share a commitment to equality of opportunity, but such a commitment does not take us very far in agreeing how exactly education should be conducted. A key issue is that of whose conceptions of equality of opportunity predominate, and this issue cannot be separated from the question of what schools are supposed to achieve. This, in turn, raises broader questions about the nature of schools and other ostensibly public and private institutions. Finally, as mentioned earlier, even given agreement on these matters, learners never quite learn what teachers teach.

CONCLUSION

The moral justification for compulsory schooling remains unclear. The original justifications run counter to liberal democratic principles, and essentially Aristotelian conceptions of childhood remain unchallenged. The empowerment case is also unproven since learning cannot be shown to be an intrinsic property of schooling (compulsory or otherwise) other than on the very unsatisfactory assumption that what goes on in the classroom is learning by definition. The economic case is also unproven; while no one would deny the link between wealthy countries and extensive compulsory schooling, this neither proves cause and effect nor implies “the more schooling, the better,” for there may be diminishing returns from increased investment in formal education. The equity case, too, is unproven, in part because the rhetoric on which it is based tends toward ambiguity and in part because there is no reason to assume that a common curriculum will produce common outcomes.

Pragmatically, however, forthcoming decisions about compulsory schooling will be relative, not absolute. No one would argue that school should take up the whole of life, and few would be convinced that it could feasibly be instantly abolished. Also, failure to prove a case for compulsory schooling does not render it valueless: some compulsion in education could be justified on the basis of a precautionary principle, for example. The real policy question therefore concerns whether more schooling continues to be better, or whether the time has come to reconsider this and take seriously the alternative possibility. The preceding discussion suggests that the latter may be the case. If so, policy makers might consider possibilities such as reducing the school-leaving age and introducing education or training vouchers that students could spend at any time and in any institutional context. At the very least, consideration of the moral, empowerment, economic, and equity cases for extending or reducing compulsory schooling might be of value in ascertaining whether this would be a wise course of action.

1. Andrew Stables, *Living and Learning as Semiotic Engagement: A New Theory of Education* (Lewiston, N.Y.: Mellen, 2005).

2. Andrew Stables, "Semiosis, Dewey and Difference: Implications for Pragmatic Philosophy of Education," *Contemporary Pragmatism* 5, no. 1 (2008): 147–162.

3. Stables, *Living and Learning as Semiotic Engagement*, 5–13.

4. John Locke, *Some Thoughts Concerning Education*, in *English Philosophers of the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries*, Harvard Classics, no. XXXVII (1692; repr., New York: P.F. Collier and Son, 1910), <http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/mod/1692locke-education.html>; Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Emile, or On Education*, trans. Grace Roosevelt and Barbara Foxley (1762; repr., New York: Columbia University Institute for Learning Technologies, 1998), <http://projects.ilt.columbia.edu/pedagogies/rousseau/>.

5. For a fuller account, see Andrew Stables, *Childhood and the Philosophy of Education: An Anti-Aristotelian Perspective* (London: Continuum, 2008), chapter 3.1. The Luther extract is quoted in Sheldon Richman, *Separating School and State: How to Liberate America's Families* (Fairfax, Va.: Future of Freedom Foundation, 1995), 40, http://www.sntp.net/education/school_state_3.htm.

6. Bruce Goldberg, *Why Schools Fail* (Washington, D.C.: Cato Institute, 1996), 8.

7. Stables, *Childhood and the Philosophy of Education*.

8. Neil Postman, *The Disappearance of Childhood* (New York: Vintage, 1994), 97.

9. Stables, *Living and Learning as Semiotic Engagement*, chapters 1.1–1.3.

10. Michael Luntley, "Conceptual Development and the Paradox of Learning," *Journal of Philosophy of Education* 42, no. 1 (2008): 4.

11. Stables, *Living and Learning as Semiotic Engagement*, chapter 7.

12. Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophische Untersuchungen/Philosophical Investigations*, bilingual 3rd ed., eds. G.E.M. Anscombe, Rush Rhees, and Georg Henrik von Wright, trans. G.E.M. Anscombe (Oxford: Blackwell, 1967), section 154.

13. The argument in this and the following section is summarized from Stables, *Childhood and the Philosophy of Education*, chapters 3.2 and 3.3.

14. Norman Fairclough, *Critical Discourse Analysis* (London: Longman, 1995), 113.

15. Andrew Stables, *Education for Diversity: Making Differences* (London: Ashgate, 2003), 130.

16. Richard Arnesen, "Equality of Opportunity," in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Fall 2008 Edition), ed. Edward N. Zalta, <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2008/entries/equal-opportunity/>.

17. Robert Nozick, *Anarchy, State and Utopia* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1974); and Richard Epstein, *Simple Rules for a Complex World* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1995).
18. John Rawls, *Justice as Fairness: A Restatement* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2001).
19. John E. Roemer, *Equality of Opportunity* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2000).
20. For example, see Ronald Dworkin, *Sovereign Virtue: The Theory and Practice of Equality* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2002); and John E. Roemer, *Theories of Distributive Justice* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1998).
21. Arnesen, "Equality of Opportunity," 28.
22. David Corson, "Making the Language of Education Policies More User-Friendly," *Journal of Education Policy* 3, no. 3 (1988): 253.