

The Quest for Learning

Liberalism and Education

The purposes of learning

- Acquiring basic life skills: literacy, numeracy, foreign languages, basic scientific knowledge
- Acquiring cognitive competence: learning to learn, evaluating information, making critical judgements
- Fostering values: making sense of life, of self and of community
- Pushing the borders of knowledge: fostering academic inquiry

Who has what stake in education?

- The individual: Education increasingly determines one's opportunities in life, is an instrument of social mobility
- The parents: They have a strong interest to see their children do well; this can be overwhelmed, however, by pressing short-term needs and by pathologies
- The Economy: It is maintained by skills and driven by innovation; there is a complex interdependency

Who has what stake in education?

- The community (nation): It defines itself by a shared narrative and adherence to a joint social contract, which have to be transmitted
- Religion: It aims to instil values and insights into the human condition
- The globe: Humanity is transforming it more and more; we better know what we are doing

Metatrends

- Human beings evolved in a world where knowledge grew slowly and was mainly transmitted.
- Tradition and experience were crucial, and societies were structured accordingly
- For the bulk of the population, physical strength was important, not just knowledge

Metatrends...

- Knowledge is now growing exponentially. After the 18th century, no individual could be on top of everything
- Economies also grow much faster, and demand for skills – and rewards – changes with bewildering speed
- Experience and Tradition get devalued in many fields, and that changes societies
- New tensions spring up within and across societies

The challenge: managing the tensions

- Education has several dimensions and stakeholders that partly conflict. Education policy has to strike a balance between them
- Education is not static, but is in virtual galopp. Education policy thus needs to do readjust its balancing all the time

Liberal Ideas on Education

- Freedom of the individual comes first; hence the stakes of the individual and, by proxy, the parents, come first
- Liberals will thus give priority to skills, cognitive competence and pushing borders of knowledge rather than value formation
- Liberals will be torn between the demands of the economy and the development of an independent individual

Liberals and the role of the state

- Most liberals agree that education is a public good. Hence the state has to ensure that everybody has access to it.
- There is disagreement how much education should be provided by the state, with the debate centering on tertiary education
- Most Liberals acknowledge the need for basic standards of values formation but are wary of indoctrination

Liberals and the role of the state

- Liberals stress individual choice as a basic right; choices should not be restricted but enlarged
- Liberals also stress the value of competition as a driving force for efficiency and quality, with the state enforcing the rules of the competitive game
- Liberals are sceptical of the ability of government bureaucracies to be effective providers of quality goods and services

... and that means:

- Basic Education should be financed by the state
- ... but education need not be provided by state agencies
- A variety of competing actors is to be encouraged to give students and and parents choice and spur innovation
- The state should provide reliable testing of educational results
- The tendency to centralize education needs to be reversed
- Ressources should be targetted at the poor

Concluding thoughts

- An amazing variety of schools have sprung up in many countries over time run by diverse actors. It seems a waste to replace them by a uniform bureaucratic system
- In many countries, religious schools have a consistently superior track record, if they are working within the parameters of a basic standard and core curriculum. This has an important integrative function
- Centralized state school systems often originate partly in a desire to do „nation-building“. This urge for social engineering needs to be critically evaluated

Group work questions

- What should the order of priorities be for education objectives in the Philippines?
- What is the role of the state in education now in the RP, and how should it evolve?