

Robbing Peter to pay Paul: resolving the contradiction of lifelong learning

Stephen Gorard
Cardiff University School of Social Sciences
Glamorgan Building, King Edward VII Avenue
CF10 3WA
email: gorard@cardiff.ac.uk

Introduction

This paper attempts to draw together relevant findings from a series of studies of lifelong learning, by considering a distinction not between compulsory and post-compulsory learning but between initial and later episodes of education and training. Consideration of the long-term changes over time in continuous initial education and training in Britain leads to an optimistic (but not complacent) picture. Consideration of later adult learning does not, and this is despite the fact that publicly available indicators of participation and qualifications among adults are improving. This paper attempts to explain how this can be. Since its purpose is to bring together several strands of research there is no separate explanation of the varied methods used and there are, of necessity, many references to existing or forthcoming reports of the empirical evidence on which the overall argument is based.

Extended initial education

By 'extended initial education' I refer to initial schooling and consecutive near-continuous episodes of post-compulsory education or training. The latter includes further and higher education courses taken at the traditional age (with or without a 'gap' year), trade apprenticeships and induction training taken on entering the workforce for the first time, and government programmes for school-leavers such as the New Deal and its predecessors. In this way I hope to distinguish it from later episodes of adult education or training, such as adult evening classes, second- or third-age returners to education, and the in-service training of established workers (see below).

Despite what I have termed elsewhere the ongoing 'crisis account' of British schooling (Gorard 2000a) and without wishing to produce an overly complacent attitude, it remains the case that initial education shows significant changes for the better. Progress in the twentieth century has led to considerable improvements in social inclusion and opportunities by gender, ethnicity, and class, and these improvements apply to education as much as any other social phenomenon. It would be inappropriate to deny, or downplay, this progress. Whatever our complaints may be in retrospect, the 1944 Education Act, the comprehensivisation of schools, perhaps even the 1988 Education Reform Act and a host of other initiatives, have all attempted to produce greater social justice in our education system, and to some extent they have all succeeded. To admit these

improvements is not to deny the existence of the remaining problems, but to help describe the current situation more precisely and so define those problems more closely.

Reasonably authoritative sources can be cited to show that people of all periods in the twentieth century have been worried about standards, underachievement, literacy and inequality in education pretty much as they are now. This is certainly true of 1904 and 1943 (in Lestor 1979). There may be a tendency for each generation to perceive a decline in standards. Perhaps it is simply that more and more is expected from education over time. In fact, evidence is available that schools are not only improving their statutory assessment scores over time, but that other problems such as truancy are declining, while schools are becoming more efficient in economic terms (Bradley et al. 1999). If true, it is welcome that these general improvements in the standards of, and outcomes from, education also appear to be reducing the educational inequalities between different social groups and geographical regions. Kelsall and Kelsall (1974) present evidence that the gap between the top and bottom of the social scale in economic, power and status terms was being reduced by the 1970s. Although inequality and injustice for the socially disadvantaged has always existed (MacKay 1999), in fact, 'if you take a long-term historical perspective of the provision of education in the UK throughout its entire statutory period... you could say that a constant move towards greater justice and equity has been the hallmark of the whole process' (p.344). Recent findings which continue to contradict the crisis account include:

- International variation in the standard and effectiveness of education systems is exaggerated, and students in Britain perform as well as those of other countries (Gorard 2000a)
- Schools are becoming more socially mixed over time, as students of differing social and ethnic backgrounds are becoming more evenly spread between schools (Gorard and Fitz 2000)
- There are no clear differences between the effectiveness of different types and sectors of schooling (Gorard 2000b)
- Gaps between the attainment of different groups of students by gender and ethnicity for example, and between the highest and lowest attainers, are decreasing over time (Gorard et al. 2000)

Nevertheless because of the crisis account there are in Britain many active projects, programmes and policies intended to improve the education system (Rowan 2000). Most are in the form of initiatives to raise examination/test scores, and even where they are attempts to improve equity and justice they mostly plan to achieve this by relative improvements in examination scores. These include calls for the reduction of selection in grammar schools, literacy and numeracy hours, citizenship, National Targets, homework clubs, male primary teachers, summer schools, teacher 'Oscars', the University for Industry, educational action zones, the abolition of the Assisted Places Scheme, individual learning accounts, a ban on calculators, and the 'national curriculum for teacher training'. A recent scheme is a revision of the GCSE examination timetable, allowing subjects with large numbers of entries to be tested later, so allowing more revision time for most candidates (Cassidy 1999a). A survey by the NFER of 245 schools found that they had introduced no fewer than 630 separate approaches to raising scores at key stage 2 alone (Sharp 1999). There are truly a plethora of remedies for education and social justice.

Unfortunately the basis for many of these plans, in addition to the reason why we have so many, is the standard crisis account of British education - standards are falling, gaps are growing, and inequality is rising. This account is far from proven (Gorard 2000c, 2000d). Since the diagnosis may be wrong the remedies are often not appropriate, being based on incomplete or incorrect knowledge of the educational problem to be solved. At best, an inappropriate 'remedy' will be ineffective. Research findings indicative of the ineffectiveness of some of these recent policies already exists. On the return to basics, international studies have failed to unearth much evidence that style of teaching has a significant impact on attainment. Nor has any relationship been found between test results and the time spent on topics in class. We generally teach as we do on faith alone, since 'education is still in the dark ages' (Kelley 1999, p.2). Policy-makers have used the apparently poor showing of British schools in international comparisons to introduce a return to traditional classroom practices, despite the fact that British students already had more skills practice than most countries and that pupils using calculators performed better (Brown 1998). Recent evidence suggests that despite the introduction of 20 minutes homework per day for 8-year-olds, homework actually does little to raise standards (Cassidy 1999b). Teachers and their styles, qualifications, and skills have been found to make little difference to results (Kelley 1999), perhaps not surprisingly given the strong and consistent relationship between attainment and socio-economic background. Large-scale longitudinal studies, such as the Youth Cohort Study, the Labour Force Survey, and the National Child Development Study, all show this strong relationship between socio-economic disadvantage and educational attainment. They provide no indication yet that factors such as pre-school experience, class-size, teaching methods, homework policy, streaming or setting have any impact on literacy or numeracy skills. In summary, the one as yet untried policy that might lead to significant amelioration would be one of reducing the initiative overload for schools, and leaving them alone for a period to do their primary job of encouraging learning.

Later learning

By 'later learning' I refer to episodes of education or training taken after a break from continuous education and training following school-leaving age (see above). The situation here is very different to that in extended initial education. Whereas initial education has grown in length, scale and funding since 1944 and still receives the bulk of political attention in Britain, later participation in education or training has not and does not. Formal adult participation in learning is now less prevalent, and less equally distributed between social groups than it was in the recent past. In trying to build a learning society, policy-makers may therefore have been unintentionally robbing Peter to pay Paul by forcing more and more learning into 'front-loaded' provision. Of course, the decline of adult learning is not immediately obvious to commentators, and may even be disputed in some quarters. One reason why this relatively simple picture is obscured stems from my notion of the two dimensions of time (Gorard et al. 1999a). Each successive age cohort leaving initial education tends to have a longer education and a higher mean level of qualifications. However, each age cohort also tends to simply retain, rather than improve, their initial education over the remainder of their lives. Thus, the incidence of education among the population and the workforce as a whole increases, but only through the 'conveyor belt effect' (Gorard et al. 1999b). The incidence of education among those past retirement age is no longer targeted, and consequently ignored in policy terms. The disastrous impact of this on third-age

patterns of participation can only come from disentangling within- and between-cohort changes over time.

As an example, a large-scale systematic household survey in South Wales revealed that males were almost twice as likely as females to take part in both further initial and later learning (Rees et al. 2000). However, when the respondents were divided into age cohorts there was a significant complication. Among those aged 38-65, men were three times as likely as women to have completed further study immediately after school, but no more likely to have undertaken any study thereafter. Among those aged 21-37, men were no more likely than women to have completed further study after school, but over four times as likely to have undertaken study thereafter. Therefore over time, initial participation in South Wales has become gender neutral, while later participation now over-represents men. This asymmetry also leads to interesting speculation on the relationship between the two types of participation. It is a commonly held view that later learning episodes are contingent upon earlier ones - the accumulation thesis implies that somehow increasing extended initial participation will itself lead to greater participation in later learning. The above finding, and others like it, show that this is not so. Many episodes of extended initial education are instead of, not additional to, the episodes of later-life episodes that occurred in previous generations. An unjustified belief in the accumulation thesis may be part of the explanation for the political concentration on initial episodes of learning, and this belief is fostered and reinforced by many practitioners as well as academic researchers.

Over the past fifty years, the proportion of each age cohort taking no part in post-compulsory education and training has declined, especially for women. However, this change is for the most part accounted for by growth only in initial episodes which have not (at least not yet) had any impact on the frequency of later episodes. It is also suggested by the same data that the socio-economic determinants of both phases while similar are critically different. Patterns of lifelong learning therefore have at least two separate components (Gorard et al. 1998a), and there is no particular reason to assume that an amelioration of patterns of participation in one component (e.g. initial) will inevitably lead to amelioration of the other (e.g. later). All of these suggestions are confirmed by continuing evidence of the 'reproduction' of patterns of participation over generations of the same family (Gorard et al. 1999c), and the lack of indicators of growth in later participation (Gorard et al. 1998b). Among South Wales respondents, the incidence of work-based training has declined over the past fifty years, while a similar pattern is observed in Britain as a whole in the last decade using the quarterly Labour Force Survey (Gorard et al. 1999b). Indeed, not only is training declining in frequency but those episodes now reported are notably shorter on average (reflecting the growth of IT and health and safety courses perhaps). This means that employers have been funding, directly and indirectly, a declining share of adult learning over time, with only a minority of companies appearing to appreciate the value of training (Coffield 2000). Perhaps one reason that later learning is less common for women is that almost no training takes place in industries with high proportions of 'flexible' (i.e. short-term and part-time) labour. Women are currently over-represented in these industries, and it is these, not learning organisations requiring highly-skilled personnel, that have actually been the growth area in Wales over the last decade (and where these industries close and relocate it is not because their staff are not *skilled* enough but because they are not *cheap* enough). Coupled with the

virtual demise of uncertificated adult education classes (NIACE 1994), it is clear that later learning is in nowhere near as healthy a state as initial education.

Overall, the reasons for the discrepancies between initial and later learning may be due to political attention and funding (e.g. Low 2000). Policies to improve education, even those to improve adult education, generally concentrate exclusively on one dimension of time (i.e. changes between successive age cohorts). The concern is for 'young people' and their future, and progress stems from the fact that the qualifications of each cohort are better than previous cohorts. Very rarely are major policy initiatives, and even more rarely funding, designed to improve the education of adults while they are adults (but only to make sure that future adults are better educated). And even on these rare occasions then the focus is on the employed and the employable, rather than the lifecourse. One such recent 'big' national policy for lifelong learning has been the creation of, and attempted progress towards National Targets for Education and Training. The targets in England and Wales include several for lifelong learning, and much has been made of the apparent progress towards them. However, on closer inspection it can be seen that this 'progress' consists almost entirely of passing young people with extended initial education into the category of 'working-age' and passing older people with few episodes of participation or qualification out of it (Gorard et al. 1999b). This is what I have termed the 'conveyor belt effect'. Once this is taken into account the impact of the policy is non-existent. In fact, despite the calls for lifelong learning, adults may be now less likely to take part in learning *as adults* than they were 20 or even 50 years ago.

However, those of us working in the area of lifelong learning must also bear some of the responsibility for problems, through our apparent obsession with supply and with overcoming barriers to access. Providing extra places and courses, and making participation easier and cheaper are certainly necessary precursors to improving rates of participation among adults. Are they sufficient? There is a air of compulsion in some writing about a learning society, suggesting that non-participation in formal learning cannot be a lifestyle choice and is somehow deviant. This underplays the role of motivational factors which are crucial to later learning (the second component of lifelong learning). The above analysis ignores a major part of non-trivial learning that takes place which is 'informal', and which is now being cited as a potential area for greater recognition (Skills Task Force 2000). This move is welcome and overdue. Unfortunately, informal learning is not currently recognised by policy-makers, nor included in National Targets for participation, and therefore too readily ignored by all of us as unmeasurable. This is especially true in official discourse where skills and qualifications have become almost synonymous (e.g. in ETAG 1999). The privileging of the visible in target-setting, and funding arrangements based on certification, actually discourage this valuable area of learning (Gorard et al. 1999b). It is perhaps no surprise that as far as it is possible to assess, such informal learning may be decreasing among adults (Gorard et al. 1999d, Fevre et al. 2000). Yet this self-directed learning for its own sake could be at the heart of a true learning society.

A recent typical, but innovative, attempt to widen participation by overcoming barriers has been the attempt to harness digital technology in the form of virtual and distributed colleges. The argument is that digital broadcasting, the Internet and so on overcome barriers of space, inflexibility and travel by bringing learning experiences to the home or near-neighbourhood of those currently excluded. What appears to be ignored in this plan is that access to the relevant

technology and expertise is unevenly distributed in society, and that those without access are also more likely to be those currently not participating in more traditional episodes (Gorard and Selwyn 1999). Around one third of the adult population left school at the earliest opportunity and have received no education or training since. There are systematic social and economic differences between these individuals and those characterised as lifelong learning participants, which have been confirmed in many reports (Tight 1998). Non-participants are generally older, less economically active, less geographically mobile, still more likely to be female, from less-educated families, and of less prestigious occupational class. They are therefore identical in summary to those currently excluded from access to the Internet (Gorard et al. 2000b). Around one third of the adult population in Wales does not have access to a home telephone, and around two thirds do not have access to any form of computer. Needless to say, these figures will decline in the future but the technology will also change (obsolescence every 18 months is a recent estimate). In a few years a reconditioned year 2000 PC with one telephone line may no longer be sufficient for access. Those currently without suitable technology will still be playing catch up.

Conclusion

The good news is that, whatever progress remains to be made, indicators from continuous initial education are moving in the right direction. Participation and qualifications are improving, while the differences between sectors and social groups are declining. These changes mean that the same indicators are also moving slowly in the same direction for the adult population, as people leave initial education for the workforce. However, once these 'conveyor belt' changes are separated out, there is no progress in participation and qualifications for adults *while they are adults*, and the differentials between some sectors and social groups are increasing over time. Current initiatives to deal with this problem suffer from one or more of the following defects: they are output-driven, they replicate and reinforce existing inequalities, and most importantly they deal almost exclusively with improvements in formal initial education or training. The standard human capital thesis that education and training are valuable for the economy (rather than valuable in their own right) is far from convincing anyway (Gorard et al. 1998c, Fevre et al. 1999), but especially so when employers appear unconvinced of the need to invest in the skills of their own employees. Whatever criticisms might be directed at individuals with little motivation to learn, or at successive administrations seemingly obsessed with spending money only on initial education, it is apparently British private and multi-national employers who are the weak partners in this lifelong learning venture at present. Perhaps one ameliorative step would be to break the supposed link between education and models of 'investment', and foster instead a vision of lifelong learning which is valuable for its own sake and which may have economic benefits but whose *raison d'être* is, like the National Health Service or the abolition of slavery, not primarily economic in nature.

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Biographical notes

Stephen Gorard

gorard@cardiff.ac.uk

Stephen Gorard is a Reader at the Cardiff University School of Social Sciences. He has been a secondary school teacher, school manager, and adult educator. He has published widely on patterns of participation in lifelong learning (ESRC Learning Society Programme), the role of digital technology in widening participation (Spencer Foundation Fellowship), and the impact of National Targets for Lifelong Learning (National Assembly for Wales). His other research interests include differential attainment by gender, school effects, and the impact of markets on education.

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