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BOOK REVIEW

**Education Versus Qualifications? A Study of Relationships Between Education, Selection For Employment And The Productivity of Labour**, by John Oxenham (ed.), George Allen and Unwin, London.

This book is a tract for our times. While concerned with the educational and employment problems of the Third World, it raises issues which have become disturbingly familiar in the west. The questions it addresses - 'Why is educational reform so difficult?', and 'Why do programmes of pre-vocational or vocational education or attempts to make education "relevant" meet with such strangely restricted success?' - are currently very fashionable, particularly in Britain. It has long been an article of faith that educational reform can improve society. Nowadays though, the emphasis has shifted from trying to make people equal through education, to simply making more of them employable, and Oxenham seems to share this more modest ambition. The contributors to this thoroughly researched and wide ranging book have produced an arresting vision of nations with similar dilemmas to our own, but where 'resources are scarcer and the need for understanding more pressing' (p. 3). In so doing they tend to confirm the view that when it comes to a fight, 'qualifications' beat 'education' without raising a sweat.

The dominant perspective and tone of the volume are set by Ronald Dare's discussion of the 'diploma disease' or 'paper qualifications syndrome' - the sweet reason of orderly reform rather than the tub-thumping protests of a Paulo Freire. Dore immediately takes centre stage, showing that schooling effectively functions as a selection device for jobs in the 'modern sector' of society. The criterion for scholastic success is academic ability; the competition for jobs in the modern sector leads to inflation in the academic qualifications needed to attain them. By the same token, other qualities like creativity and cooperativeness are downgraded, and social division encouraged. In fact, 'the more severe the diploma disease, the more will social and political factors conspire to favour the richer and better-placed and to discriminate against the poorer and less powerful' (p. 30). The rest of the book is devoted to testing this general hypothesis with 'empirical evidence', and to searching for ways to break the circle. First, it inspects 'interactions between employment and education', more specifically the role of employers. The focus then shifts from employers to educators, exploring the effects of selection on education itself. Lastly, Angela Little looks at ways of 'combating the diploma disease'. This, sadly, is by far the shortest section of the work; there is, apparently no easy solution. The best hope of reconciling 'efficient selection' with 'good education and equity', according to Little, is radical reform of the examination system itself, but she is less than convincing in showing how this could change the basic situation. Jonathan Ungar, in a sparkling essay on the educational implications of China's Cultural Revolution of the 1960s, also strains to find a realistic path of reform. He demonstrates that the efforts of the Maoist radicals to eliminate the competitive school ladder led to educational disaster, and that the post-Mao regime, returning to an Emphasis on academic ability, has merely revived the 'diploma disease'. But he suggests that China's vocational school programme of the 1950s-60s, much less ambitious and drastic than the Maoist scheme, did have some success. 'In a situation where no proposed solution is free of drawbacks it helps point one way forward.' (p. 191) Yet it is difficult not to feel pessimistic about the prospects for reform after reading this book - and where sweet reason fails, protest is bound to follow.

The close relationship between educational processes and social and political change, emphasised throughout this book, is surely of crucial importance for post-analytic philosophy of

education, and the book also serves to remind us that recognition of this relationship need not be confined to marxists. Educational philosophers may not welcome the notion that 'the being and workings of the educational system are determined more by the economic system than by educational philosophy' (p.29), but it is one that they would do well to bear in mind. Examination of Dore's central hypothesis is also solidly based upon a historical perspective, and related to the different cultural contexts and realities of states from Tanzania to Thailand. Again, in liberating the philosophy of education from the narrowly analytic school, such historical and social considerations are important weapons for the post-analytic armoury, and might be high on the agenda for a new philosophical regime. Thus philosophers of education might benefit from considering some of the issues raised by this book. But the book itself would profit from a stronger notion of what 'education' involves, and here a more philosophical approach might be valuable. The question raised by the book's title is ultimately not resolved because there is no alternative vision of education to set against the current functions of schooling. Various desirable qualities which present attitudes and practices tend to frustrate are periodically mentioned, but no coherent picture emerges. Merely to argue that education should be made more 'relevant' is not enough, and in any case might be held to conflict with the aim of encouraging individuality unless a careful case is made. 'Education versus qualifications' never sounded like a fair contest anyway, but they might at least have had the grace to invite the loser.

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