

Education and Crime: A Political Economy of Interdependence

Character, Vol.8, No.4, June 1980

By

Edwin G. West

The main assumptions that underlie our public education systems were first articulated and debated during distant historical periods. Sometimes, the records of these debates can stimulate us to reconsider policies that now pervade our society. Furthermore, reconsidering these ancient controversies may even help us to pursue and identify contemporary evidence which can be used to reassess their pros and cons. But such an approach is not simply a matter of second-guessing the dead. More importantly, a judicious mix of historicalism and current evidence can help us to break new intellectual ground.

This paper starts with a consideration of some disputed education issues in early nineteenth century England. Though this scene is distant in space, as well as time, the issues involved were especially relevant to our present concerns. The debate was about the forms of educational institutions that would help generate good character in the young. And the ultimate conclusions I reach, from first starting in the past, touch on contemporary American education proposals such as education vouchers and tax deductions to assist parents to buy private education. But, first, we must go back.

The Shaping of English Public Education

Modern attempts to dissect the nature of "character" in individuals usually acknowledge some residual mystique beyond the reach of the investigator's tools of analysis. In contrast, in the early 1800's, scholars seemed to be confident that they knew, or would soon know, all there was to know about character. Not only would "character" be easily analysed, it could also be deliberately created by appropriate institutions, especially the schools.

Consider the views, for instance, of the English intellectual James Mill (the father of John Stuart Mill). His overall character shaping program united Bentham's "pleasure/pain" system of education with the French "associationist" psychology of Helvetius. Mill made the assumption that the whole of our mental life is based upon responses or reflexes conditional upon physical or mental stimuli. As a result, he thought it was scientifically possible for a system of education to form model citizens with the "character" of one's choosing. He felt that men certainly would continue to pursue pleasure, but those pursuits could be encouraged which also gave pleasures (or avoided harm) to others. Such was the reasoning in James Mill's celebrated article on education in the *Encyclopedia Britannica* in 1818.

In retrospect it is easy to expose the innocence and naiveté of yesterday's "social science." Even if as Mill proposed, the world was ruled by science, one can still predict that the conflicting opinions of scientists themselves would have eventually disturbed his confident optimism. Certainly the social science of psychology (which Mill helped to found), and which has conspicuously affected all types of education, has not been characterized by the unanimity he expected. In any case, society is not ruled exclusively by science, but is led also by philosophy, sentiment, emotion, and religion. For this reason, the conflicts concerning the generation of "true" character inevitably become still deeper. And since our society professes to be a democracy, it is obliged to allow minorities the daily opportunity of expressing and influencing others with their own opinion. And these expressions disclose that widely varied opinions exist about so-called moral issues. Under such circumstances, morality certainly cannot be legislated as if it were the outcome of science.

Consider the question, for instance, of the right kind of schooling. Should religion be allowed to play a part in such schooling? This question was intensively debated in England during the nineteenth century. Interestingly enough, debates of a somewhat similar nature also surrounded the development of the common school movement in America during the same pro-Victorian (or early Victorian) era. But perhaps the English debates displayed greater sophistication, due to the fact they occurred on a

national level- in part, they transpired in the Parliament-not at local and state levels, as in America.

The Utilitarian philosophers James Mill and Jeremy Bentham both favoured widespread government support of (and control over) secular education. But this position excited the opposition of the Dissenters, the church groups essentially critical of the Church of England and in the forefront of the effort to promote state support of education. Mill and Bentham, to win popular support for their views, entered into a temporary compromise with them and offered a plan providing for non-denominational religious teaching. But the Utilitarians' *ultimate* target was a national system of completely secular education. The religious groups, it was hoped, would be ultimately out-manoeuvred.

We should realize that, while these intellectual manoeuvrings were occurring, England did not have a state supported school system. The existing mass-based schools were financed by parental payments and private (usually church-related) contributions. The Utilitarians (who were simultaneously philosophers, publicists, and the advisors of politicians) were engaged in a semi-hypothetical exercise, aimed at delineating the elements of a model state-assisted mass education system.

When Parliament passed the Reform Act of 1832, the Utilitarians took this as a sign that there was climate sympathetic to their educational aims. As a result, their parliamentary spokesman, W. A. Roebuck, proposed that the English government actively intervene in mass education. He attempted to show the House not only the substantial benefits that generally flow from education, but also " why Government should itself supply this education." He argued that state education would lead to a reduction of crime. "...as mere matter of police, the education of the people ought to be considered as a part of the duties of the Government." Yet his "police' argument was the minimal basis for government schooling. The more elevated basis was the duty of government" directly to promote good!" And, in those days, as suffrage in England was steadily being expanded, there was anxiety that people be properly instructed before they were allowed, eventually, to have the vote. In Roebuck's

words in Parliament: "People at present are far too ignorant to render themselves happy even though they should possess supreme power tomorrow."

But in 1833, the year that Roebuck was presenting his Education Bill in the Commons, education (without government economic support) had widely spread among all the ranks of society. The majority of males, for instance, were already literate. Furthermore, it is interesting that William Cobbett opposed Roebuck during the debates on the ground that crime in England was even then increasing at the same time education was spreading through private support. "If so, what reason was there to tax the people for the increase of education?"

The Utilitarians were well aware of the spread of privately supported, church-related education. They believed, however, it was of the *wrong* sort of education, a sort that would certainly not reduce crime. Their objective, therefore, was to wrest ultimate control of education from the religious authorities. Furthermore, in addition to 'undermine' religion in education, they also hoped (at least temporarily) to lessen parental control over children and their education. And, during this period, such parental control was very powerful; over half the costs of education, even among the lower classes, was paid directly by parents-and because of such payments, schools assiduously supported the goals valued by parents.

The historic debate between Cobbett and Roebuck, therefore, resolves itself in the question: Do public (state) schools reduce crime more effectively than do private (mainly religious) schools? While the debate occurred in England, it also has ramifications for our country, and for our period. "Crime," in a sense, is a synonym for general patterns of poor compared with good character development. And we are faced with contemporary controversies about whether public or private schools are doing better jobs in character development and whether we should expand or diminish our commitment to public sector education.

The debate between Cobbett and Roebuck was pervaded with many generalizations. In contrast to such vagueness, we should now be able to assess the comparative crime-preventing merits of public and private schools more

systematically, due to the accumulation of recorded facts and the increasing sophistication of statistical analysis.

Crime and the Schools: Some Statistical Background

The nineteenth century Utilitarians planned for a school where children were systematically controlled and instructed in an orderly environment so that when they were old enough to leave they would be a help instead of a menace to society. The most striking modern fact in this context is that the crime and violence the Utilitarians wanted to subdue (and exclude), has now entered the very portals of the public school itself.

An analysis of data from twenty-six cities in the U.S. Law Enforcement Administration's *National Crime Survey* shows that the risk of violence to teenagers is greater in schools than elsewhere. Forty percent of the robberies and thirty-six percent of the assaults on the urban teenagers surveyed (who all attended public schools) occurs in schools. The risks are especially high for youths aged 12 to 15. Indeed, sixty-eight percent of the robberies and fifty percent of the assaults on youngsters of this age occur at school. Only from the reports of public school *students* collected by the National Institute of Education in 1976, it has been found that theft (largely from students by students) is easily the most widespread of in-school offences. Nearly two and a half million of the nation's secondary school students have something worth more than a dollar stolen from them in a month. An estimated 282,000 secondary school students reported that they were attacked at school in a typical one month period. The proportion was twice as high in junior high schools as in senior high schools. The risk of serious attack is greater in urban areas than elsewhere. For the typical public secondary school student, it was estimated that he or she has about one chance in nine of having something stolen in a month; one chance in eighty of being attacked; and one chance in two hundred of being robbed.

The human costs of school-related crime are greater than the reported economic costs. Because of fear for personal safety, teachers fulfil their duties less effectively,

and students who spend their days at school afraid are not likely to learn much. The NIE investigations found, among other things, that 800,000 students stayed home from school at least once in the previous month because they were afraid, 12 percent of the secondary school teachers (or 120,000) said they were threatened with injury by students at school; a similar number said they hesitated to confront misbehaving students because of fear, and almost half of the teachers reported that some students had insulted them or made obscene gestures at them in the last month.

Ironically, for the nineteenth century Utilitarians, school was a place of instruction to prevent the young from resorting to crime when they *left* school. The criminal, in other words, was thought to be typically a member of the adult class. Current facts present an entirely different picture. According to a 1974 FBI report; 22.2 percent of total arrests for violent crimes, and 48.1 percent of total arrests for property crimes (in 1973) were made of individuals aged 11 to 17, which is the usual period for enrolment in junior and senior high school. Yet only approximately 14 percent of the U.S. population is in this age range.

Sociologists and psychologists in the recent past have conducted extensive studies that attempt to describe young offenders and the source of their problems. However, the subject of serious deviant behaviour *in schools* has only recently come to attention. But although some new work is beginning on how schools may respond to the problem, hardly anything has been done in the way of attempting to answer the question that is rooted in nineteenth century history. Is there a significant difference in the effects of public schooling compared to private schooling?

Are the Effects of American Private Schools Different?

Let us start off by noting that the pattern of income distribution among the families of American contemporary private school students is remarkably similar to the distribution pattern for the entire American population. Most private schools are not exclusively for the rich. Thus, one cannot simplistically assert that private schools skim the cream of the student pool-and leave the public schools only for students from low income families. In fact, many urban private schools enrol higher

proportions of students from low SES families than many prestigious suburban public schools.

Now, we can proceed to discuss the formal hypothesis that delinquency rates increase as the proportion of public school students to private school students rises.

Some of the rationale underlying this hypothesis – in other words why (unlike the Utilitarians) we might expect that private schools would improve discipline - can be outlined as follows. Private schools provide families and students with a far greater variety of choices than can be found among public schools: there will be choice among different schools *per se*, and also choice among schools wedded to different programmatic philosophies. For instance, parents may adopt one or another religious affiliation, or choose among schools with the same affiliation but with different administrative styles, or choose between secular (private) or religious schools. This variety should permit parents and students to select a school particularly appropriate to their family needs, or even to shift their choice if their first decision turns out to be unwise. Presumably student discipline should improve as the congruence grows among family, student, and school values.

Again, if there is reasonably effective competition (as there may be among private schools), schools which cannot maintain good discipline will suffer a loss of parental support - unless they change. To offer a concrete example of the effect of such competition, recall the well-publicized "free schools" (many of which were secular private schools) of the late 1960's and early 70's. At this time, they are practically extinct- They have died because parents stopped patronizing them. Conversely, a variety of questionable public school "innovations" of that same period have died much more slowly than did the free schools-precisely because they were shielded from market forces.

To consider another element of our underlying rationale, recall that the NIE study found that *academic* competition inside school appears to reduce a school's risk of violence. " The data suggests that violent students are more likely to be those who have given up on school, do not care about grades, find the courses irrelevant, and

feel nothing they do makes any difference." This finding is relevant to the public/private debate. As the NIE report observed, in the "progressive" atmosphere of modern public school teaching grading has, on average, become de-emphasized because of the preference for "cooperation over competition." Private schools in contrast have, on the whole, maintained competition and grading as essential features in education. Consider also the NIE's finding that larger schools experience more violence and vandalism than smaller ones. Private schools in the U.S. tend to be smaller in pupil enrolment than public schools. For this reason also we should find that private school areas, are less crime prone. Incidentally, there is evidence that the steady trend toward larger public schools has been stimulated by the school consolidation movement a movement led largely by administrators whose own salaries increase as their schools enlarge.¹ The private school system does not lend itself to this kind of push toward monolithic institutions.

If, finally, the data does show that the users of private schools are less crime prone, it would carry with it the strong suggestion that religious schooling is more conducive than public schooling to an orderly society, since 80 percent of the private schools in the U. S. are church affiliated.

The Statistical Test

One attempt has already been made at the sort of statistical hypothesis testing suggested here. In a recent paper, John R. Lott and Gertrud It Fremling statistically compared changes in (a) the reported United States national juvenile delinquency rate from 1961 to 1971 to (b) changes in the national proportion of children attending public as compared to private schools. During this period, the national rate of delinquency did, in fact, increase, while the proportion of private school attendees declined (probably largely due to the decline in enrollment in Catholic schools).

Of course, other factors which might affect juvenile delinquency such as unemployment and the degree of urbanization-were changing over the same period.

¹ Robert Staaf, "The Public School System in Transition," in *Budgets and Bureaucrats*, ed. T.C. Boreherding (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1977).

But Lott and Fremling used multiple regression analyses which made allowances for these other influences. Their analyses produced statistically significant and robust findings that the expansion in public (relative to private) education during the period studied was associated with consistent increases in delinquency. Thus, during the period, the juvenile delinquency rate increased by 14.8 per thousand, while the percent of children attending public schools rose 3.56 percent. The shift in schools accounted for 22 percent of the entire increase in delinquency. The remaining 78 percent of the increase was explained by the other variables examined.

Lott and Fremling deny that their findings are affected by differences in the socioeconomic status of the public and private school pupils, because their study relied on time series analysis. This technique can be explained as follows: in any year, it is possible that private schools (if they were generally filled with higher SES students) might show better discipline than public schools precisely because of their SES advantage. But the data shows that when private school enrollment comparatively declines, and that other factors, such as prosperity, stay constant, there is some steady rise in delinquency. This demonstrates that delinquency is more a function of the type of school than its students' SES. In any case, it is a fact (although Lott and Fremling do not seem to have recognized it) that private schools, as already noted, are *not* the exclusive haven of the rich.

The significant work of Lott and Fremling leads us to the conclusion that, so far, the best research available rebuts the arguments of the Utilitarians and their American equivalents. Public schools – as compared to private schools – do not tend to reduce crime. There is even tentative evidence of reverse causality: juvenile crime actually increases with an increase in size of the public school sector. Incidentally, we should notice that this tentative scientific conclusion is widely supported by the opinions and actions of many parents - who obviously believe that private school education is more effective than public along a wide spectrum of outcomes.

The research just discussed will - and should - provoke further study. The issues are not definitively settled. But, if further research confirms that of Lott and Fremling we must conclude that the costs of public education are much higher than was

originally believed. Already published figures show that the *conventional* economic cost of public education is about twice that of private schools.

It now seems as though there may be an argument for adding to that cost the higher social cost of delinquency even though one of the aims of public schooling has been to lower it.

References

John R Lott and Gertrud M Fremling "Juvenile Delinquency and Education: An Econometric Study," International Institute for Economic Research, Westwood Center, Los Angeles, CA., 1980.

E. G. West, Education and the Industrial Revolution (London: Batsford, 1975).