

Compulsory Education: National and International Perspective

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Seriously questioned by several critics of schooling, compulsory attendance, though written into present laws, is no longer exempt from searching examination. These authors review the case for and against such requirements both at home and abroad.

THE ISSUE of compulsory education has recently come alive as a subject of philosophical and constitutional thought. Current views on the subject range from support for legal backing of compulsory education to a concern for freedom that prompts a permissive attitude toward an individual's decision to go to school or otherwise. There is a middle ground approach in which decrease in the number of years of compulsory school attendance is seen as an alternative. There are other alternatives pointed toward "functional literacy" rather than formal schooling; "contracting" on the acquisition of basic learning skills such as reading, writing, arithmetic, and others; or a focus on adult education since incentives for education are more real at that level than they are at the lower age levels. The variety in alternatives and the impending questions make the issue of compulsory schooling involved and intricate; and further analysis of its relevant dimensions becomes necessary.

Compulsory education was a comparatively early development in the American states and school attendance laws have been in effect for a long time. Each state controls its own school system, providing pro-

grams for all children beginning at age 6 and continuing to age 16 in some of the states and to 18 in the remainder (3). Some state laws allow the public school system to exempt mentally retarded children from attending public school. It is not a denial of education for these children but a recognition of their special needs and the possible creation of a relevant environment conducive to their development. There are other kinds of exemptions which vary from state to state. One state, for example, provides for exemptions of children from school attendance in the following categories:

1. A child whose physical or mental condition is such that school attendance is not advisable
2. A child who is sixteen years old and above
3. A child residing at a place from which he has to walk over two and a half miles to attend a public school
4. A child who is legally employed according to child labor laws (17).

In the same way compulsory attendance laws differ from one state to another. The compulsory education law in one state reads:

Every child between the ages of seven and sixteen years shall be required to attend a public school, private school, denominational school, parochial school, or be instructed by a compe-

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tent private tutor, for the entire length of the school term in every scholastic year . . . (16).

There are similar laws in other states in order to educate individuals to be able to contribute fully to the development and progress of a free society. Critics who question such laws in view of difficulties in enforcement tend to look at them as codes to be implemented with force. In fact compulsory education laws as they stand demonstrate recognition of societal concern for education and therefore should prompt voluntary compliance by parents to send their children to school.

Two Points of View

One point of view regarding compulsory education favors strongly the state laws and their intent to provide education for the masses. The reasons for the support are as follows:

1. One effect of compulsory attendance laws is that the typical dropout at the time of leaving school is 16 years of age (6). It means that these laws increase the holding power of the school.

2. It is the responsibility of the state to provide educational opportunity for children.

3. Compulsory attendance laws demonstrate societal recognition of the importance of education in a democratic society (4).

4. A free society must ensure that the children learn not only the basic three R's but also concepts and skills of rational decision making so vital for self actualization.

5. Since the family is becoming less effective as a result of technological advancement it is necessary for children to attend school.

6. The society is based on the concept of independence. It means that an individual must learn ways to preserve and practice independence. These ways can be learned effectively in a structured school situation.

There is currently an emerging point of view that opposes or at least questions the compulsory attendance laws on several grounds. Some of the reasons are given below:

1. Compulsory school attendance was dictated more by the necessity to keep young people

out of the labor market than by any demand for highly educated workers. This is not the case any more (8).

2. Compulsory attendance laws cannot be enforced in the new age of student rights and in view of social and economic demands.

3. Compulsory school attendance laws encourage conformity and the trend toward adult control of children's lives (5).

4. Compulsory attendance is not consistent with the tenets of a free society.

5. Academic education provided by the school does not prepare an individual for life and, therefore, should not be considered the sole avenue for the individual to gain social status.

6. The mass media in the society have reached a stage of development that an individual can acquire the vast amount of knowledge without going to school.

The latter view, obviously is against compulsion in education and not education in itself. The quality of education is still a predominant concern and alternatives suggested are measured against the needs of time and exigencies of circumstance. The greatest objection is to the content and mode of schooling and the emerging suggestions visualize changes in the following directions:

1. Compulsory attendance laws may be enforced only up to the age level when most students have attained basic skill levels in reading, writing, and arithmetic (8).

2. The society should provide for intellectual recreation in the place of formal schooling (1).

3. A number of alternatives within school systems should be provided so that each individual could learn to fulfill his or her unique needs.

4. Earlier career orientation and training opportunities should be provided so that the individual is able to earn a living.

5. In order for children to learn school subjects such as elementary science and mathematics they should be able to work alone or in groups of twos, threes, and fours. This cannot be accomplished if the teacher is always in front of the room and nobody else is allowed to talk (18).

6. Learning is more effective if it is based on the consideration that learners' interests are important and that interests provide motivation to learn.

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7. Experiments may be conducted to try out open school, nonstructured curriculum, and nongraded evaluation.

8. Several alternatives to "formal education" exist and must be tried out in the spirit of empirical experimentation.

While the two points of view referred to earlier contest the value of compulsory attendance laws, there are advocates of constitutional support for education. It has been argued that education is not "a fundamental right explicitly or implicitly protected by the constitution"; and therefore an amendment to the U.S. Constitution may be in order (12). Such an amendment would provide for public school education as a fundamental right guaranteed to all people of the United States. The concern here again is for quality education. The contention is that the Constitution of the United States should guarantee "quality education" with efficient and motivated teachers, a strong guidance and counseling program, adequate materials and facilities, and a creative and stimulating learning environment to every member of the society.

In our future oriented society some prophecies point out that compulsory education laws will be modified to require a decreased number of years in school and that the dropouts would have the option to return to school by their own choice to pick up the unfinished part of their schooling (9). There are projections concerning the role of the teacher which would be drastically changed in the future world.

It is interesting to note that those who question the compulsory attendance laws visualize the value of education in terms of the economics of life. Those who favor reduction in the number of compulsory school years also base their argument on the essentials of education which should prepare an individual to earn a living. The counter argument relates education to a creative, humane, and sensitive life.

On the International Scene

The importance of education is recognized on a worldwide basis and every developed country has compulsory school attendance laws irrespective of their philosophical and political differences. The basic purpose of the laws is to develop enlightened citizenry to meet the demands of an era of emerging freedom especially characteristic of nations emerging after World War II. Variations are discernible in terms of the length of years of compulsory schooling, specific objectives of compulsory attendance, and the role of the local government in compliance with the spirit of such laws.

After the 1917 Bolshevik Revolution, the U.S.S.R. government started liquidating illiteracy by establishing educational centers and ordering literate people to help the illiterate. Compulsory and universal elementary education starting at the age of 7 plus was required throughout the U.S.S.R. by 1931. Article 121 of the 1936 Constitution of the U.S.S.R. provides that education is to be universal, free, secular, and compulsory between the ages of 7 and 15. In theory every child must be in school between the ages of 7 and 15 but most children quit school after completion of 5th grade because of unavail-

ability of semi-secondary education in rural areas. A compulsory attendance law is generally enforced for those between 7 and 12 years (13).

In 1951, the school system of China was changed to: four years of nursery and kindergarten (ages 3-7); five years of primary school (ages 7-12); three years of junior middle school (ages 12-15); and three years of senior middle school (ages 15-18). In the early period of communist revolution, reforms were focused on the introduction of general compulsory elementary education throughout the country. To cope with the illiteracy, spare-time schools were operated for working people by assigning administrators, engineers, and technicians of the factories as teachers. In 1958, elementary education was extended from five to six years. There is a drive for expanding secondary education to all the children in the age group of thirteen to eighteen (13).

Between the ages of 6 and 14, education has been compulsory by law in France and under the 1959 decree the upper age limit has been raised to 16 for all children. All states in West Germany have laws requiring a pupil to attend school for at least eight or nine years beginning at age 6.

In England, compulsory education begins at age 5 in primary school and children can leave school at age 15 (3). Compulsory primary education in England covers two administrative stages. The infant school provides education up to 7 plus and the junior school between 7 and 11 plus. Recently changes in compulsory attendance laws require children to stay in school up to age 16 (11).

Problems of Enforcement

Every country that has compulsory school attendance laws faces the problem of enforcement. Since the enforcement of such laws is a problem, efforts to make the school experience attractive and meaningful to the learner are necessary.

In England, according to the provisions of the Education Act of 1944 parents are encouraged to see that their children are edu-

cated according to their age, ability, and aptitude. It is within law for parents to educate their child at home (7). A large number of primary schools in England are "open," that is, individualized and less structured (2). The changes suggested by the Plowden Committee and implemented in several schools were inspired by a humanistic concern for children and education based on learners' interests. The emphasis is on the acquisition of social skills necessary for group life and the development of human potential to discover, create, and adjust to the environment (14).

The emerging English primary school has no classroom or desks. The straight rows of desks have been replaced by interest areas, in which children have the opportunity to explore and to satisfy their intellectual curiosity. Pupils work in their own area of interest and progress at their own speed. The classroom is arranged in a way that is attractive and stimulating to children. Scheduling is flexible to allow children to pursue their individual interest areas (10).

The most striking feature of the British primary school is the variety and richness of learning alternatives. The schools are de-

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signed for children and thus facilities exist in the form of library space for individual reading; studios for painting, modeling, sculpture, and craft-work; music rooms with a variety of instruments; and places to explore mathematics, science, history, or geography. Learning experiences are provided both within and outside the walls of the school.

In West Germany, schools have been providing compulsory part time vocational education to children since 1919. This type of education consists of eight to twelve hours a week in addition to apprenticeship or prac-

tical work. It is extended up to age 18; and provides an alternative to those adolescents who do not attend a full time school (15).

Recent educational developments in West Germany have resulted in the emergence of a third type of school along with the existing two types, the "Gymnasium" and the "Hauptschule." The new school is the "Realschule" formerly called the "Mittelschule." The main function of the school is to impart four or six years of general semi-academic education in order to prepare for medium level careers including the ones in business, industry, and health services.

It is clear that compulsory education cannot be viewed separate from theory and practice of education in general. The national scene of education in the United States and the international perspective suggest vital changes in educational thought. These changes must go beyond the essentialist view

of education and clarify the goals of education in the context of individual and societal needs. Compulsory education is a means to an end and not an end in itself. The goal of education in a democratic society is the development of a fully functioning individual who can utilize his or her potential to solve the problems facing the society at present and in the future.

The democratic pattern of our society necessitates a diversity of alternatives for each individual. The question is not whether provisions should be made for compulsory attendance laws. It is, rather, the need for the opening up of options and alternatives in an advanced educational structure. The compulsory education laws simply reflect societal concern for the welfare of the individual. Rich and rewarding alternatives in education would further strengthen this commitment.

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