One of the mainstays of ‘progressive’ education doctrines over the last twenty years has been a firm opposition to academic selection in schools. Ian Hunter argues that this stance is misconceived. He contends that there are sound social democratic reasons for selection, and for the meritocratic ethos associated with it...

The role of the education system in assessing students and selecting them for different and unequal social destinations is one that causes many teachers and administrators a good deal of worry. This worry has a weak and a strong form. The weak form is a concern that the procedures of assessment and selection are not fulfilling their technical ends; for example, because they are assessing students on the basis of inherited cultural style rather than trained scholastic abilities.

Often people who worry in this way seek simply to purge such procedures of traces of irrational social biases and values—and this seems to me an appropriate and routine professional concern. The strong form of this worry, though, is quite another matter. It is an anxiety about scholastic assessment and social selection as such, no matter how explicit or rational. This anxiety is typically expressed in the language of cultural egalitarianism and democratic rights. Here the fear is that in assessing and selecting students for their social and occupational futures, educators may be falling short of a higher goal: the complete development of students as human beings. This article is intended as a small contribution towards a therapy for this anxiety.

I want to give below some historical and theoretical reasons for thinking that this ‘higher goal’ is meaningless in the context of modern education systems. I will suggest that the ranking and social selection of students is a fundamental function of such systems; that this function is compatible with at least one social-democratic conception of social justice; and that the overwhelming majority of professional educators is quite properly committed to a
continual refining of this function and the meritocratic ethos associated with it.

The following remarks by Bill Hannan—taken from an essay entitled 'Universal Schooling Should Qualify Universally'—neatly encapsulate the anxiety over social selection that dominated progressive educational thinking in the 1970s and 1980s.

If schooling aims to provide an adequate preparation for professional training (I use professional to mean any productive work) and for responsible cultural participation, then democratic schooling should aim to provide this double preparation for everybody. The most obvious corollary of this is that universal schooling should provide a qualification adequate to any kind of job training.

For Hannan, writing as a leading figure in the Victorian Secondary Teachers Association and as the Executive Officer of the Victorian Curriculum Advisory Board, equality of opportunity is inseparable from equality of outcome. Any process of education that ends in the grading and selection of students has been 'trivialised', diverted from its true goal of realising the inner potential of the individual student.

By way of contrast we can look at some remarks on the same theme made by the British political sociologist TH Marshall in his celebrated essay 'Citizenship and Social Class'. In Marshall's account the function of social selection, while a relatively recent historical phenomenon, is one of the fundamental and defining features of modern education systems and—under his meritocratic interpretation—a source of legitimacy rather than anxiety.

The right of the citizen in this process of selection and mobility is the right of equality of opportunity. Its aim is to eliminate hereditary privilege. In essence it is the equal right to display and develop differences, or inequalities; the equal right to be recognised as unequal...the final outcome is a structure of unequal status fairly apportioned to unequal abilities. The process is sometimes associated with ideas of laissez faire individualism, but within the educational system it is a matter, not of laissez faire, but of planning. The process through which abilities are revealed, the influences to which they are subjected, the tests by which they are measured, and the rights given as a result of the tests are all planned.

The difference between these two conceptions of equality of opportunity—for Hannan it means equality of qualification, while for Marshall it is the 'equal right to be recognised as unequal'—is clear. The line of demarcation runs much deeper than this, though. For Hannan the education system is (or should be) a vehicle for the cultural development of humanity; for Marshall it is an instrument of social administration.

A good deal of thinking about education takes place in the space defined by the contrast between Marshall and Hannan. Perhaps its most distinctive and worrying feature is the difficult and ambiguous manner in which this sort of
thinking distinguishes between the meritocratic and the egalitarian, between the process of social selection and the goal of complete development. It is often unclear, for example, whether criticisms of assessment and selection procedures are driven by the weak or strong form of the concern noted above; that is, whether their objective is to improve these procedures in the name of the ‘equal right to be recognised as unequal’, or to abolish them in the name of a right to ‘a qualification adequate to any kind of job training’.

The same ambiguity regarding the scope and form of educational reform pervades much of the work done in the 1970s and 80s on the theme of educational inequality and the notion of ability. The value of this work is, it seems to me, unquestionable. It shows statistical correlations between the inequality of educational outcomes and inequalities in students’ social origins. Sometimes it goes further in suggesting that the responsibility for this correlation lies with schools which test students for aptitudes acquired outside the school environment, and in particular for what is sometimes called ‘cultural capital’—aptitudes derived from privileged social backgrounds.

The interesting thing about these findings, however, is that in principle they are compatible with both Marshall’s and Hannan’s positions—but only under different interpretations and oriented to different ends. From Marshall’s perspective...the link between educational outcomes and students’ social backgrounds is an indication of the distance that the education system has still to travel to reach its meritocratic objective: to detach the unequal outcomes of education from inherited inequalities of status and prestige, and to link them instead to unequal scholastic performance. For Hannan, though, the same findings have a quite different significance. The linkage of different ability levels to unequal social outcomes is unacceptable per se:

All selective devices of the HSC [the old Victorian Higher School Certificate] or aptitude test kind imply that some are more entitled to privilege than others, and they will continue to do so as long as higher education continues to admit people to privileged positions. I don’t think anyone bothers to deny this. On the contrary, it is offered as the reason for remaining exclusive—that the prospect of privilege must irresistibly attract the most talented. So, because I want to argue against education’s being thus identified with social privilege, I must argue against all selective devices based on academic merit however that may be measured.

Not all progressive educationists, however, are as uncompromising as Hannan appears to be. Typically, those who point to the links between unequal social backgrounds and unequal educational outcomes do not specify which of the two interpretations governs their analysis. Is the link an indication that any education system that selects students for unequal social destinations is intrinsically unjust—so that the very notion of different ability levels is an ideological mask for the reproduction of class differences? Or is it a sign that more needs to be done to detach the formation and assessment of scholastic aptitudes from social origins, before the unequal rewards of education become socially just?

In fact, this is something about which Hannan himself is uncertain. Indeed, his apparently uncompromising last quotation continues by hesitating between precisely these two interpretations: “I would prefer to argue that a just society would not countenance or cultivate privilege, but at the very least, I would argue that education in a just society should not be tied to the prevailing system of social privilege”.

To oscillate between the abolition and the reform of the system of social selection is no small ambivalence. This ambiguity, which has deep historical and social roots, is a source of significant instability and incoherence in public thinking about education. As Hannan comments, no-one denies that in the actually existing education system scholastic assessment functions to select students for unequal social destinations. Yet a significant number of teachers and administrators claim to reject this function in the name of universal qualification. In the case of administrators this amounts to a disavowal of the system whose conscientious supervision remains their professional responsibility.

Of course, this professional responsibility is disavowed only in the name of a higher calling. Progressive officials see their conduct as governed by the demands of cultural equality and social justice. Yet there are, I would argue, prima facie grounds for doubting the adequacy of this self-perceived role. In the first place, it ignores the fact that in speaking for ‘the equal right to be recognised as unequal’, Marshall is also speaking in the name of social justice. Marshall is not defending scholastic ability testing in the name of ‘excellence’ or ‘cultural standards’ but as a (admittedly imperfect) means of eliminating ‘hereditary privilege’ from the legitimately unequal distribution of ‘social rights’ presided over by the school system. Second, it is not at all clear that the goal governing progressivist proposals to ‘democratise’ education—the goal of universal qualification—is practicable or indeed makes sense within the values and structures of historically existing school systems. If this is the case, then the disavowal of professional responsibility for the administration of this system—purportedly at the behest of a higher democratic calling—may very well simply mean a rejection of the very values and techniques that give legitimacy to the professional conduct of educationists.

It is not difficult to detect the point at which progressive officials disavow the system that they help administer. It occurs when an intellectual and ethical commitment is made to an educational process that is held to be more fundamental, broader, less utilitarian, or more organic than the actual methods of the historically existing school system. Since the Romantics the notion of ‘culture’ has signified the idea that human beings are formed by a wider process of ‘education’ far more profound than anything achieved by mere school systems. And insofar as they invoke this process as the basis of a fundamental critique of the school system, progressive officials are adopting the oppositionalist ethic of the ‘cultural intellectuals’. It is only
against the backdrop of this commitment to culture that Hannan can denounce the artificial character of mere ‘schooling’.

Education is a quality to which every person is born. From their first observable moments, people learn. In their first few years, they learn prodigiously. I believe in their unalterable right to preserve the extraordinary gifts they are born with, but I observe that our society, mainly through its schools, often deprives them of it by making them dependent on school-concocted substitutes...[and ultimately] to a certificate that is given or withheld for the sake of a single mark in several hundred.

In Hannan’s case this critique has, as this quotation indicates, an individualist and humanist character. But this is not its essential feature. Hannan sees culture as residing in the untutored child. Yet others, ostensibly more sociological and historical, equally easily locate it in the working class, Third World peasants, women—in short, in any group whose moral aura makes it into a plausible bearer of that supposedly ‘organic’ or ‘authentic’ process of development which, we are told, lies beneath the planned process of development administered by the school system.

I have formulated the issue in this somewhat roundabout way in order to pre-empt a particular understanding of the situation. It is often held that this goal of complete human development represents an ideal that the actually existing school system can be condemned (or praised) for approximating to some degree. I want to suggest, on the contrary, that this image of complete human development, far from being a universal truth, is itself merely a mundane reality in a department of existence (humanist ethics) which, while connected to the ethos of the modern school system, possesses no inherent ethical superiority over it. If this is the case then the claim that ‘Universal schooling should qualify universally’ indicates a serious misunderstanding of the organisation, character and functions of modern school systems. Cultural intellectuals condemn such systems for their alleged ‘failure’ to achieve the complete development of the person. The argument I have sketched here might suggest, on the contrary, a failure on the part of the cultural intellectuals and progressive officials to understand the distinctions between the different departments of existence traversed in the course of their own personal and public lives.

Needless to say here I am only sketching the outline of an argument towards such conclusions. Nonetheless there are several key features of modern school systems that might render such an argument plausible. The following summary of these features is offered as goad to further debate.

1) The limited and particular character of human capacities and rights. This is partly a question of which end of the historical telescope one looks down. Looked at from the end of the cultural intellectual, the capacities and rights made available by modern school systems can never be anything more than fragments of the complete set promised by ‘authentic’ cultural development.

Seen from Marshall’s perspective, however, these capacities and rights represent important instruments for making more homogeneous the previously disparate modes of existence and social strata of pre-modern societies. According to Marshall, pre-administrative societies are characterised by disparate social strata whose unconnected ways of living give them the character of ‘islands’ of ethical, social and political existence. It is anachronistic to call such societies unequal, for there is as yet no common standard of living against which inequalities might be registered. When such a standard does start to emerge, according to Marshall, it is not from a single general source or along a single line of historical development (‘culture’). Instead it emerges in a piecemeal fashion as a result of the historical expansion of specific forms of social administration: the common law system (civil rights); the parliamentary-electoral system (political rights); the welfare system (social rights). These systems penetrate those previously discrete islands of social existence, joining their inhabitants via the device of standardised rights and capacities, and creating the possibility for new kinds of equality and inequality to emerge against the backdrop of a common standard of living.

This account doesn’t conceive of these different lines of development meeting at the end of history in a form of a
complete, fulfilled humanity. On the contrary, the different rights, and their different logics, may often cross-cut and contradict each other. It is meaningless, therefore, to expect such a system to promote equal access to a complete set of human capacities or to condemn it for ‘failing’ to do so.

ii) The governmental function of modern school systems. Modern school systems are the instruments of a particular type of political administration. Yet, ironically, this fundamentally political character of modern education systems has been obscured by forms of thinking whose official objective has been to uncover a ‘hidden’ politics of education—a way of thinking common to Marxism and to the culturist approach, both of which tend to reduce the operation of school systems to the reflection of social processes operating elsewhere.

But the politically organised school systems that emerged in late eighteenth-century Germany and early nineteenth-century England were at once too historically specific and too self-contained to fit passively into this model of education in society. The idea that national populations should be educated, and that this was a task for the state, emerged not from the grand dialectic of culture and class but from the political and intellectual techniques of a new type of national government. Thinkers such as Michel Foucault have located these techniques in the systems of state policymaking, social statistics, economic management and social discipline that emerged in various eighteenth and nineteenth-century states. It was inside these new administrative environments and mentalities that education systems were conceived as instruments for the administrative creation of literate, healthy, productive, orderly and useful populations. In short, the objectives of modern school systems—at first the social disciplining of chaotic populations, and later the training and selection of groups for specialised social and economic roles—are the essentially political creation of the systems of administration that characterise the modern governmental state.

iii) The technical character of educational thinking and organisation. Sophisticated modern school systems appeared first not in liberal-democratic states but in the absolutist German states, pre-eminently in Prussia. Moreover, when a partly democratic state like Britain began to implement such systems in the first half of the nineteenth century it did so not as a result of popular democratic pressure but through the actions of an elite—an elite concerned to combine administrative expertise and a pastoral concern for the population.

Whether in democratic or non-democratic states, modern education systems treat national populations not as the possessors of political rights but as the objects of planned care and attention. When progressive educationists propose to ‘democratise’ the school system they typically have one or both of two interrelated strategies in view. They may aim to bring the structure and logic of schooling within the sphere of popular control (through voting or collective decision-making) so that the population may rationally decide its own cultural formation. Alternatively, they may aim to treat the social qualifications unequally distributed by schools as democratic rights open to all, usually by abandoning ranked assessment and attempting to isolate schools from occupational and higher academic selection processes.

Two features of the technical character of educational thinking and decision-making suggest that such strategies are at least impracticable and possibly meaningless. First, when the early educational administrators took up their positions they did not do so as representatives of Locke’s ‘rational man’—that is to say, as people in possession of a universal faculty of reason which would enable them to share that expertise and authority with the whole population. Rather, they did so, we have already noted, as the exponents of a specialised set of political and intellectual techniques. There is no reason to think that these techniques might be appropriately vested in collective community decision-making.

Modern school systems are the political creations of the modern state

Second, the technical organisation of the school system means that the social rights and capacities it engenders belong to a different sphere of reality to the political rights engendered by the parliamentary political system. The techniques utilised by the school system are intended to enable children to internalise standards of social deportment and scholastic performance. While the national distribution of these standards creates a new uniformity for personhood, their technical effect is to create a far more sensitive and sophisticated registration of differences. The social and scholastic abilities formed by the modern school system are thus differentiated and unequal; the right they confer, in Marshall’s words, is ‘the equal right to be recognised as unequal’. School systems in social democratic states thus obtain their legitimacy not by promising equal outcomes but by aiming to free the distribution of social rights from earlier systems based on the transmission of inherited cultural and economic wealth.

(iv) The ambivalence of progressivist educational policy. Working with their hands on the levers of social differentiation and their eyes on the image of complete development, it is hardly surprising that progressive officials have developed policy initiatives characterised by a deep ambivalence. Indeed, this ambivalence is responsible for the most remarkable feature of public educational debate: its unstable—in some cases almost schizoid—oscillation between technical planning and cultural critique, between administrative engagement and aesthetic disavowal.

Consider some of the more notable recent policy initiatives in Australian secondary school systems. Two interrelated developments stand out in particular: the move to treat secondary education as a ‘phase in its own right’ by disengaging it from the selection requirements of universities...
and the credentialling requirements of occupations; and the development of non-competitive descriptive student profiles, as a substitute for graded assessment structures. For their proponents these developments are the expression of an egalitarian humanism, and signify the opening up of culture to the people and the return of the education system to democratic control. This is the way Hannan interprets such policies—which he has helped to implement in the new Victorian VCE.

As I see it, the argument against 'grading' is that selective schooling, which is necessarily competitive and hierarchical (with a strong social class bias), is in contradiction to democratic schooling. Democratic schooling, by definition, opens up a certain range of cultural awareness and control to the whole people. Selective schooling reserves access to this same knowledge to certain groups. Grading comes into the argument because various techniques of grading schools or students are the institutional way of being socially and culturally selective.

It is not difficult to show that this interpretation of the new policies does not take us very far into their reality. In the first place, as technical modifications to a system of government it is clear that such policies will not and cannot be implemented by popular plebiscite. And indeed at this point the 'progressive' side of the progressive official abruptly drops from sight and we are confronted by an unelected functionary enforcing expert policy via administrative fiat. The change in Hannan's political demeanour is quite startling:

What we should be working at now is outlawing graded assessments in the period of compulsory schooling. It is not enough, in my opinion, to advocate school based decision-making with the pious expectation that school communities will make selfless, democratic decisions. Some decisions must be constrained by public policy.

In fact the arguments I have assembled here go to support Hannan's last statement. Non-elected experts and officials must indeed make decisions for populations in complex governmentally administered nation states. It is self-deluding, however, to call these 'democratic decisions', or to imagine that under such circumstances administrators speak for the 'whole people' in some higher sense. In other words, the policy of non-graded non-selective assessments is 'democratic' only in the imagination of the cultural critics, where it signifies equal access to complete development. As a technical modification to a technical system of cultural formation, however, it is in fact incapable of democratic decision and control.

It is not, then, the non-democratic character of this policy that is a problem. What is a problem is that the progressive official should claim a democratic mandate for his or her initiative while simultaneously insisting that, as a matter of 'public policy', it cannot be left to the decision of school communities.

This suggests some of the dangers inherent in the position of progressivist officialdom. In claiming their mandate from an insubstantial 'democratic culture', progressive officials disavow the very constraints capable of rendering their conduct legitimate and responsible: the constraints of technical and ethical competence imposed by membership of a profession.

In short, the Romantic-democratic critique of the actual school system leads many educational professionals into a delusively understanding of their civic role. However, it also has a more practical effect—it leaves their public intellectual conduct lacking in restraint and consistency. The unstable compound of cultural critique and technical expertise from which educational progressives shape their social personalities often leads to moral self-aggrandisement and civic irresponsibility.

Perhaps it is unfair to recall that during the 1970s Hannan used the pages of the VSTA's official journal to advocate replacing the Victorian Higher School Certificate with a ballot for university places. Still, this proposal cannot be treated as pure jeux d'esprit. It is after all quite consistent with a particular interpretation and use of the system of non-graded descriptive student profiles—an interpretation which treats the non-graded system as a means of evading the processes of academic selection.

The technique of descriptive student profiles is not, however, limited to this culturalist interpretation. In Queensland, for instance, this technique has been used to refine the system of graded assessment and social selection to very different ends. In this use, descriptive profiling is used to identify a distinctive capacity for a particular professional vocation. The intention here is not to disavow the ranking of abilities in the name of complete human development; rather it is to clarify the standards of ability involved in this process with a view to purging those not clearly transmitted by the school system.

This professional objective (imperfectly realised as it is) leads towards the realisation of a social right—not the right of equal access to complete human development, but the right of students to attain unequal social and occupational status on the basis of demonstrated differences in their scholastic abilities.

Few educational professionals would disagree with this description of the role of the actually existing education system. Many, however, are anxious that this role, and the rights it confers, are at best a partial realisation, and at worst a complete debasement, of the ideal of complete human development which they mostly continue to hold dear.

I've tried to argue here that the use of this ideal as the basis for a critique of the school system is always practically ineffective, and often self-delusive. In doing so I hope to have provided some degree of therapy for this anxiety.

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