

Not Radical

Mark Harrison, A Private Education For All, Centre for Independent Studies, Sydney, 1996

Reviewed by David Loader

THIS small but important book presents an economist's viewpoint on the comparison between public and private education. Because it advocates a shift from the former to the latter, it may not get the audience it deserves.

It is widely argued that the centralised public education system delivers education equitably and efficiently to all Australians. Harrison, an economist at The Australian National University, challenges both of these claims. In the case of equity, he argues that subsidies are poorly targeted, with children from middle-class backgrounds and the rich receiving substantially more funding than the more needy children of the poorer families, some of whom graduate from school with inadequate literacy skills. He examines census data and shows that '48 per cent of those secondary school students with family incomes of \$50,000 or more attended public schools, while 18 per cent of those with family incomes under \$18,000 attended private schools' (p. 14). As well, households in the highest income decile received educational subsidies six times higher than households in the lowest income decile.

As for efficiency, Harrison finds that it costs more to educate a child in a government school than in a private school and that children in private schools 'on average have fewer resources than in government schools' (p. 11). Despite this higher expenditure, the 1994 Saulwick opinion poll found that people by a two-to-one margin thought private schools did a better job than government schools in developing the potential of young people and preparing them to be good citizens. Harrison thinks that spending more money on public education will not make much difference. The problem lies with what he describes as the dominance of producer interests and the preoccupation of the education lobby with its narrow focus on expenditure. He argues that in public education issues are resolved on the basis of 'political clout, not consumers' choice' (p. 5). In this way, the outcomes favour the interests of those who work within the political process: teachers and bureaucrats as well as politicians. Harrison would give schools autonomy so that they can compete with one another for students, arguing that as such competition would deliver the best possible education for young people it would shift power from the producer to the consumer.

Harrison believes that the problems of Australian education are inherent in the government operation of schools, and that only privatisation will achieve reforms that deliver what the customer wants and needs. For example, in East Harlem, an area with an extremely poor socio-economic environment, teachers set up their own schools which operated with substantial autonomy while parents were free to choose amongst the schools. As a result, student achievement has greatly improved. Re-

sponding to a critic who suggests you can't run a school like a supermarket, Harrison asks 'What if we ran our supermarkets the way we run our schools?' (p. 22).

And yet, interesting and relevant as *A Private Education For All* is, radical it is not. Harrison has not moved away from a focus on the supplier. Although outcomes would improve if schools were given more autonomy, the market place could be freed up even more by broadening the concept of schooling. Schools could be removed altogether and the financial resource reallocated to individuals and community groups to spend as they see fit. As James Moffatt has noted, requiring students to report to certain buildings where the state-imposed curriculum is administered by agents of the state, regardless of students' interests or needs, is no better than the treatment that used to be administered to the mentally ill. 'A few decades from today people will regard the schooling of today with revulsion, as astonishingly primitive' (Moffatt, 1994:5).

Harrison comes close to dealing with this issue when he looks at the family. He asks whether government policy has 'contributed to the weakening status of the family and whether changes can halt or reverse it' (p. xi). Families could be strengthened if they were given more responsibility for education. After all, schools no longer have a monopoly of educational resources: there are more computers in homes than in schools, and children in general are probably more skilled in using them than their adult teachers.

Harrison does admit that what is needed is choice in education rather than choice in schooling. But this argument is not advanced sufficiently. Do we need schools any more? What we need is not so much a market-based education system, with autonomous schools competing for students, but a total rethinking of how the resources of the community can be reallocated more equitably with better outcomes. We need to move away from the notion of the school as the workplace and the teacher as the controller. Giving control of learning back to the learner, focusing on just-in-time rather than just-in-case education, might lead to a community that is empowered by choice and self-direction.

This does not mean that there is no role for government, which must be involved in matters like teacher training, student performance measurement, curriculum, and the industrial relations issues arising from contracts between the provider and the teacher. But a regulatory role for government seems more appropriate than a management one.

Reference

Moffatt, J. (1994), *The Universal School House*, Josey-Bass, San Francisco.

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