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On Education and the Common Good: A Reply to Coulson

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Abstract:

This response to Coulson's recent *EPAA* piece, "Human Life, Human Organizations, and Education," argues that Coulson is wrong about "human nature," social life, and the effects of unregulated capitalist markets. On these grounds, it is argued that his call to remove education from the public sphere should be rejected. The point is that education is certainly beneficial to individuals who receive it, but to think of education as purely a private and personal good properly distributed through the market is seriously to misconstrue the meaning of education. We should not care to be the sort of people who do so.

Before replying to the substance of Coulson's recent *Education Policy Analysis Archives* paper (1994), it should be noted that the entire argument rests on a false, or at least questionable, premise--one that Coulson neither makes explicit nor defends. He assumes that public schools are failing, and that they are failing just because they are public. As both Berliner (1993) and Bracey (1993) have shown, public education is not failing; it is doing better than ever. Further, most people know this (Elam et al. 1993) and are quite satisfied with their own local school, though the media have convinced them that schools in general are in trouble. This is not a claim that schools are perfect, or even that they are good enough. There is no such thing as "good enough," but that is a feature of the complexity, importance, and difficulty of the enterprise; it is not a sign of school failure but of the nature of the world.

Setting aside that Coulson bases his argument more on myth about school performance than on fact, the argument itself warrants that we reject his call for the privatization of education. He wrongly describes both human nature and capitalist markets, and he recommends that we create a competitive and inegalitarian system of education devoted only to the pursuit of

individual benefit, with no regard for the common good. There are errors of fact and interpretation in the anecdotes he offers to suggest systemic failure. But these are trivial compared to his portrait of humanity as "homo economicus," motivated solely by our own interests and acting for our own benefit. More unbelievable is that Coulson expects people to believe that unregulated capitalism benefits more than a few powerful and well-placed individuals. While the ability of capitalism to produce riches is beyond question, it also creates tremendous extremes of wealth and poverty. This is just what the polity seeks to avoid in education when it establishes and supports common schools.

Coulson's call to privatize education calls into question society's commitment to its children, denying that there is any collective responsibility. There is certainly no question that public education currently allows extreme differences in per- pupil expenditures between rich and poor districts. Even if privatization were not likely to increase this inequality, which it is, it should be resisted. For while education is a public enterprise, the current inequalities need to be justified; they are presumed violations of our own sense of justice by which we collectively commit ourselves to the task of educating the young.

Under the regime of the market to whose discipline Coulson would have us submit, inequality would no longer require a justification. What would be abandoned in the move to distribution of education through the market would be the commitment to substantial equality. The market distributes things unequally, but that is not usually seen as a problem with most commodities. In a market regime it would cease to be a problem if some few children had the equivalent of a four star education, while most others went to McSchools. This sort of unequal distribution is, after all, what markets are supposed to do, and each child would have the school she "chose," or that her parents "chose" for her. Why should we interfere in this choice? On the other hand, with schools as an enterprise of the polity, demonstrated inequalities result in presumptive obligations to improve the conditions of the disadvantaged.

It is this predictable inability to see educational inequity as a problem of justice that should compel us to reject allowing the market to distribute education. Markets have their proper sphere, but they should be contained within those areas. Education, because of its role in social membership and in social adaptation, is not a commodity for the market. Social formation, partly and properly carried out in the schools, is not purely a matter of individual choice; it is also a communal enterprise. It is certainly not a mere commodity.

Some consideration of his arguments will convince most of us that Coulson is simply wrong about both human nature and the operation of unregulated markets. We will then see that we have every reason to reject his call to erase the "public" from public education.

Human Nature

Coulson portrays us as "homo economicus," individuals whose actions are trades or investments, and who make decisions based on what action will put the most into our personal satisfaction accounts. His is a crude utilitarian view, that we always simply strive to maximize our satisfaction and minimize stress. On this view, society is purely a means to our individual ends. Our associations are always aimed at getting us what we want; we can have allies, but no friends. I suggest that this is not true for most of us, who feel distress at the suffering of others, even those we do not know, will never know, and who can be of no reciprocal use to us. Many of us are moved by the hunger of children, by what Michael Ignatieff (1984) calls "the needs of strangers." Indeed, a skillful story teller can move us to tears about the misfortunes and sufferings of people who have never even lived.

Coulson can reclaim part of his story if he says that we reduce our own stress by relieving others' suffering, or that it makes us feel good to do good. This does preserve the face of the utilitarian argument, but not its force, because this turn disconnects the reconstructed

utilitarianism both from the sociobiological story he tells to support it (we learned to cooperate only to benefit ourselves in the hunt) and from the competitive conclusions he draws (we should not collectively concern ourselves about the education of the young, but only look out for our own children). Once we acknowledge the good feelings that come from helping another, the utilitarian explanation will not do the work Coulson needs it to do: it is of no use to me to feel good about helping others, especially strangers or the weak and/or powerless, and there is no benefit to me to feel distress at the misfortune of others.

Coulson offers the game known as The Prisoner's Dilemma as a metaphor for social life. His point is that in this game the winners are those pairs who learn to maximize their individual advantage by cooperating. He offers this as evidence that we cooperate and care for others in the context of social life because cooperation benefited those who learned it. Further, he argues that this is still true. However the salient features of that game, those that enable the players to learn cooperation as the winning strategy, are that (1) each person benefits from "kindness" to the other and is punished for betrayal, and (2) feedback is immediate and consistent. Neither of these conditions obtains in everyday life. Quite often there is no reward for our generous deeds; similarly, there is often no punishment for our selfish ones, which are frequently rewarded. Yet we see a great deal of generosity, even when it works against our own interests. Some of the wealthy do vote for just taxation, though that means that their own taxes are increased. In a large and complex society, "free riders" benefit from the generosity of others combined with their own stinginess, and yet most people recognize the impulse to generosity.

Even if it is true that sociability originally developed in humans because it aided in survival on the hunt, it grew beyond that, and did so fairly quickly. The archeological evidence indicates that our Neanderthal ancestors were already taking care of the sick and the wounded who could not contribute to the hunt, and were burying their dead with ceremony and ritual that suggests that they held the deceased individuals as having value that outlived usefulness (Leakey 1992).

Aristotle (1985) recognized the intrinsic value of friendship so much so that the largest section of the Nichomachean Ethics was devoted to a consideration of its nature and value. His conclusion was that there was no human life so good that friendship would not improve it. Tom Green (personal communication) correctly points out that while it is true that having friends is useful, it is equally true that anyone who selects friends based on their usefulness will have none. In other words, the usefulness of friends is a consequence of friendship, most likely an inevitable one, but to value friends for their usefulness is to misunderstand friendship.

Further, Noddings (1984) has made a strong argument that ethical motivations are rooted strongly in an intuitive and natural care for others. Similarly, Wilson (1993) argued that there is such a thing as a "moral sense" that is concomitant with human common bonds. He notes that there are cruelty and greed in the world, but that these are the exceptions. Most people do not ruthlessly pursue their self interest, but often act in the interests of common good.

This is not, of course, to paint a picture of humanity as closely related to angels -- at least not just to angels. There is indeed the self-serving and competitive side that Coulson describes. However, basing any argument, as Coulson does, on "human nature" is risky business. It is easy to see both selfishness and generosity as potentialities in "human nature"; whether individuals and societies become in fact selfish or generous may have as much to do with education and public life as with anything as immutable as is suggested by the term "human nature."

Precisely for this reason, education should remain a function of the polity: it is in the public discussion about public policy in public space that the balance between personal interest and common good is properly maintained, or at least sought. There are two reasons why education must be a public concern: (1) while education is a private good (individuals benefit from education), it is also a public good (the society benefits from an educated citizenry); and (2) not all parents will make wise choices for their children, and justice demands that we make

certain that the education we are providing them is appropriate.

So while it is true that we can act purely to advance our own causes and maximize our own interests, we can also act in ways that do not benefit us personally. Even if we say that such action reduces our stress and maximizes happiness, we cannot reduce such action to merely contributing to survival of the fittest. Further, and significantly, education helps children learn what they should value in themselves and in others, and this is yet another reason for education to be an enterprise of the polity.

The Gentle Face of Capitalism

Coulson's next assumption, that unfettered, unregulated capitalism serves the best interests of all can be more briefly dismissed, as it is an elegantly argued theory that is most effectively refuted by the facts.

The reality of free-market capitalism is exactly the opposite of Coulson's theoretical picture, in which everyone benefits from competition. Even theoretically, it should be obvious that the losers do not benefit. The nature of capitalist markets is that there will be losers as well as winners. The reality is that small differences in power between one manufacturer or provider and another accrue so that weaker competitors are eliminated and new ones are stopped in their tracks. To the extent that we do not see this happening now, it is because of government action to prevent and break up monopolies. There is ongoing competition in capitalism only because of government intervention in the market.

Nothing here is meant to attack regulated markets or capitalism. Even while rejecting Coulson's naive enthusiasm for the world of dogs eating other dogs, it nonetheless seems true, to paraphrase Churchill, that capitalism is the worst form of economy imaginable, except all the others that have been tried. However, the marketplace is neither so logical nor benign as Coulson portrays it. While it may be (and probably is) the case that capitalism increases the GNP and the average per capita income of those nations that try it, that result can be obtained by doubling the wealth of the richest quartile and halving the wealth of the poorest quartile. The fact remains that in unregulated capitalism, the rich do get richer and the poor do get poorer.

Briefly, then, Coulson has failed to justify his recommendation. In the first place, public education, while imperfect, is hardly the bureaucratic and bumbling nightmare that he assumes; second, human nature, to the extent that we can say anything about so dubious a construct, is not so strictly utilitarian as he claims; and third, the unregulated market is anything but benign.

Money and Schools

Coulson's claim that money and educational quality are unrelated suggests that we should be unconcerned by the great disparities between expenditures for the children of the rich and expenditures for the children of the poor. Money does matter, and the strongest proof of this fact is that those who can do so spend it, tell those without it that it makes no difference, and they fight to keep the privilege.

Like much else in Coulson's argument, however, the claim is not quite completely false. If we continue to segregate and ghettoize the poor into enclaves where there are no jobs, no social cohesion, and no hope, adding some money to their schools will make little difference. Taken on its own terms, then, Coulson's argument suggests that besides investing more in the schools that serve the poor we must massively invest in the families and communities into which they are born and in which they are raised. To deprive the children of the poor educational resources on the grounds that they have so much else working against them is not only unjustified; it is unconscionable.

Coulson discusses the much-publicized case of Kansas City, where great sums of money

were spent to improve the physical environment in which children were educated. This is widely reported to have been a waste of money, and so Coulson reports it. The argument is that, since the test scores of these schools did not rise, the money spent to improve the schools was wasted. Yet I strongly suspect that if there were middle-class suburban white children attending school in decaying and dangerous buildings, and if money were spent to build new schools and equip them with the sorts of amenities that most white kids take for granted, improved test scores would not be the measure of success. More likely, a decent school environment would be seen as something that the children simply deserved.

Those parents who can afford to spend a great deal of money on the education of their children and who do so are not to be criticized. Parents have primary responsibility for the well-being of their own children, and parents who could provide a better than average education for their children but did not do so would not be praiseworthy. What should be censured, however, is the hypocrisy shown by those who spend large sums on their own children while telling the parents of children denied such options, "Money does not matter," and working for public policies to make sure that the poor never get a chance to find out just how false that claim is. Seeking to provide an advantage for one's own children is not shameful behavior; seeking to disadvantage others' children is.

The Argument for the Common School

What can we say about the value of education as a shared and public enterprise? I will argue three points: (1) social life is about more than just personal benefit; (2) as a polity we must intervene for the good of the children for whom we have a mutual responsibility; and (3) the view, currently so popular, that "government" is the enemy of "the people," is both false and pernicious. Finally, I will argue that if these three propositions can be justified, then we have an obligation, moral and practical, not to just maintain, but to renew and strengthen, our commitment to education as a public effort of a democratic polity.

Our Social Lives

The first part of my argument is the weakest, in the sense that it will not be at all convincing to those who find that they do not already have good reason to believe it. In fact, I am at a loss as to how I might prove that there is intrinsic, not just utilitarian, value to human association. Coulson's frequent citation of *The Economist* in defense of his thesis calls to mind the caricature of economists as people who know the price of everything but the value of nothing. So it appears here. To see social bonds as merely useful seems to me the saddest view we could have of our human lot in this world. But that is me; those who find no intrinsic value in human relations will not be moved by my claim that there is such value.

So in one sense my appeal here is to the already convinced, that is, to those who are already aware of the intrinsic goodness of human contact and care. The argument goes something like this: the young of our species can learn that friendship has intrinsic value; but it is also possible to raise individuals who see others merely as means to their own ends; who see the only definition of success as the furtherance of one's own individual projects; who believe the truth of the bumper sticker that proclaims, "He who dies with the most toys wins." Further, it is possible to raise not just individuals, but whole generations, who have lost the ability to recognize the value of their fellow human beings. It is, in other words, possible that we will create (or are already creating) the Benthamite world Coulson describes.

To be reduced to pleasure maximizers in our social relations is to be reduced indeed. It is to become far less than we are capable of becoming, both individually and collectively. I will put forth as an empirical claim that this is not yet the case, that we still see a non-utilitarian value in

human relations and that Coulson is wrong in his description of human nature. Each reader will need to decide the validity of this claim for him- or herself.

As a thought experiment: would you feel (or have you ever felt) inclined to put flowers on the grave of a friend, despite the total lack of utility in such an effort? Artificial games like the Prisoner's Dilemma aside, in real life have you ever gone out of your way on behalf of a stranger? If your answer is yes, then there is more to your social life than Coulson's account allows. For while these actions might "reduce stress" or "maximize pleasure," that fact alone disproves the view that Coulson is arguing, for it shows that our social life is more than can be explained by the survival value of cooperation in a Darwinian competition for individual survival.

Common Obligations

Even if we agree that individuals occasionally do choose to act without regard to return, and therefore do not always act rationally regarding pleasure-maximization, does it follow that there is an obligation to do so? Must we, in other words, take positive actions to protect the well-being of others? Is there any requirement that we be as compassionate as our Neanderthal ancestors who bound up the wounds of their companions and nursed them though they could no longer contribute to the group's hunting success? Specifically, does the polity -- the legally constituted "we" -- owe protection to children from the effects of market competition in education? Coulson says no; I disagree. And this is the core of our disagreement.

There is a utilitarian argument in favor of communal care for our children: poorly educated children will be burdens on the society in the future, and therefore it is in the collective interest to see to their proper education and nurture. This is probably true, but it is not the sort of argument I want to make here.

We have a moral and ethical obligation to care for the children in our midst. This is partly a different sort of utilitarian argument: we are better off to the extent that we make our society a more decent human community. The point can perhaps be made more forcefully by putting it this way: what sort of people would not protect their children? What would we say about such a people if we were not they?

Of course, the issue is not this simple. It is surely not true, as Coulson rightly points out, that all children need this care from the polity: the vast majority receive this concerned care from their parents, and quite effectively. However, this fact is not an argument against public schools for two reasons: (1) the polity has an obligation to see to the well-being of all children, not just the majority with effective parents; and (2) the common schools were never intended to provide education only for children whose parents do not do so.

On the first point, no matter how small the minority of children whose parents might not choose wisely, the question will remain: what do we owe, as a people, to those whose parents do not? (The percentage of such children might be small, but the number might be distressingly large. When we consider the number of children who are now abused and/or neglected, and add the number of children whose parents will lack the skill, knowledge, time, information, or wisdom to choose wisely, the number of children placed in inadequate or harmful educational settings could be quite substantial.) Under Coulson's scheme, we owe them nothing -- not even pity. Their parents made a bad choice, but capitalism must have its losers. Note that there is a failure here even with respect to Coulson's rather spare sense of justice: the child pays for the mistakes of the parents. If I choose to purchase an automobile and it turns out to be a lemon, Coulson can defensibly say to me that I made a bad choice and I will pay for it -- that is the proper nature of market transactions: *caveat emptor*. If I choose a school for my daughter, and that turns out to be a bad choice, Coulson must tell her that I made a bad choice, but that she will pay for it.

Capitalism is good at providing individuals with incentive to produce things that can be

sold at a profit. However, it is not at all good at distributing these things evenly. It might even be said that the function of the market is to distribute those things that cannot be distributed equally in a manner that appears to be equitable. However, education, at least k-12 education, is not one of those things.

Coulson's remedy to the inequality in a privatized system is vouchers for the very poorest, but they will not do. In the first place, this move replaces the educational entitlement that the polity owes to all children with a market that allows the wealthy to choose and charity for the poor. At the margins, for those just too "wealthy" to qualify for charity schooling, the choice will be between spending on schooling or on, for example, housing. Further, even if the system were created so that schools were required to take all applicants on a first come, first served basis, and even if schools were required to accept the vouchers as full payment for tuition (and neither of these attempts at fairness are part of Coulson's plan), all vouchers can accomplish is the possibility of access. Actually getting into the right school will require that the child have intelligently chosen her parents such that they can and will exert the effort required to make a good school choice.

For all Coulson's talk about the right to choose and suffer or enjoy the consequences, the real question is: "Who gets to choose for the child?"; this is not a case where we can give the child the choice for him- or herself. And the public policy question here may not be how to maximize the good obtainable for children whose parents are good choosers; rather the best policy may be one that aims to minimize the harm to the children whose parents are not good choosers.

This notion of "good school choice" is itself one that needs to be examined more closely. What is a "good" school? Given the many possible good ends that schools can serve, there may be no one answer, and the answers that count individual and personal goods may differ from those that count social goods. It is the resolution of these issues that Coulson wants to leave to the market, elevating the personal perspective and eliminating the social one. But in truth, these two sorts of goods need to be balanced, and the polity is the proper place for that to happen.

On the second point, public schools were never founded on the premise that vast numbers of individual parents were, or are likely to be, derelict in their duty to care for and educate their children. The schools in this society are public for quite a different reason: education is also a social and common good, and therefore it is properly funded by the polity. The polity has an interest in ensuring that children receive the education that will prepare them for democratic life.

Government: "Them" or "Us"?

Perhaps there is no trend in American life more ominous for our future than the increase in the number of those who accept one of Coulson's assumptions: that ours is not, and cannot be, a government of, by, and for the people. There is no commons in Coulson's world, no shared interests, no mutual commitment. Nothing beyond what I want for myself. Government is not a means of addressing common concerns and providing for common needs, but a threat to individual prosperity, a foreign agency that limits individual rights. I can imagine no view of the relationship between a government and a people more threatening to democracy.

Granted that government, however democratic in form, may disconnect from the people, it is also possible for the people to reclaim the government and redirect it. Coulson presumes that government is the enemy, not the servant, of the people, and therefore argues that we should make no effort to seek a common good through political action. Instead, he tells us, we should disconnect as fully as possible from all government. This may serve the interest of the most talented and fortunate, but can hardly be credibly seen to be either just or democratic.

This is the strongest reason to reject the libertarian view that informs Coulson's ungenerous vision of society: by speaking only of rights, and not at all of responsibilities of membership,

Coulson argues that society owes protection and assistance to him, but that he owes nothing to society. The property rights he expects society to enforce for his benefit are absolute and non-negotiable. His sole interest is in what society can do for him; he denies any responsibility to do for his society or his fellow citizens. His notion of rights is seriously deficient in that it is disconnected from membership and the responsibilities that follow therefrom.

Coulson's proposal to improve schools by changing from democratic governance to blind market forces seems to miss the nature of democratic life. Our schools are perhaps the most democratic institutions that we have in this society. School boards are locally elected, and are often easily accessible to their constituents. School budgets in many, if not most, places are voted on directly by the local residents. There are problems, and there is great inequality based on community wealth, but the system as a whole remains responsive to democratic control. Further, the answer to inequities rooted in local power and wealth differentials is certainly not to turn the system over to the market, given the market's proven record of exacerbating such differentials.

If government is not responsive, we have a remedy: become involved and make it more so. Government is not the enemy of the people; it is, or it can be, the agent of the people. That is, the members of the school board are chosen by us from among us. The same is true, in a less intimate sense, of our state and national government officials. While there is much evidence that government today has become seriously estranged from the people it is supposed to serve, there is equally good reason to suspect that this is due at least in part to the withdrawal from public life -- the polity -- by large numbers of people. Coulson advocates continuing, rather than correcting, this move to erode the possibilities of democracy by removing a fundamental institution from democratic governance.

Of all things, we should fear that turning the schools into market institutions is to do that which is least desirable -- to remove the possibility that the polity could influence the course of citizenship development.

Education and the Polity

Given that our species has a social life far richer than competition, and given that democracy fails to the extent that we allow losers in the competition for educational opportunity, and given that democratic government allows for schools to be directed by the polity in a way that balances, or tries to balance, the common and the individual good in education, we see that we have good reason to reject the Coulson proposal to abandon our children to market forces and those who would profit from their manipulation.

Imagine for a moment a world in which there is profit motive for enticing enrollment, and the polity no longer had a say in school governance. The schools that would be most able to attract students, and the most profitable students at that, would be the same schools that currently do so. They would be the elite and prestigious schools. Continuing to draw students whose parents are wealthy, sophisticated, and supportive, they would be in a position to trumpet the "quality" of their program and would continue to attract those parents most willing and able to make large tuition payments. These schools would not need to compete for large enrollments, niche marketing to upscale and highly profitable select customers.

There would likely be a second tier of schools, those fastest to find a way to cut costs -- McSchools, providing educational junk food to a mass market, trading quality against cost containment. The paradigm institution might be the Stanley Kaplan Memorial High School, guaranteeing high SAT scores (or whatever single measure will count most in attracting customers), but not much in the way of citizenship or literature or critical thinking. The polity may have good reason to not want to invest in this sort of school. The proper balance between public and private interest may be right where it is: I can send my child to a Stanley Kaplan Center if I wish to pay for it, but public funds will not fund it. These mass market schools might

be expected to generate high profits just as their fast food counterparts do: low wages, high volume, no frills.

There will be a third group of schools, those who at the beginning of market competition are the ones with the fewest resources serving the least powerful segments of the community. These will be the schools that will register the students whose parents, for whatever reason, did not succeed in the competition for entrance to the winner schools. That is what capitalism is about: producing losers as well as winners, and more of the former than the latter.

The issue here is whether education, a requirement for democratic citizenship, ought to be distributed as a commodity, or whether education is in some fundamental way different from microwave ovens. To ask this question is to answer it: democracy is in no way threatened if some citizens have inferior microwave ovens, or none at all. That is not so if the market leaves some children with inferior education. Especially if the inequality results, not out of failure to live up to presumptive commitments to equality, but out of policies designed to produce and validate these inequalities.

To repeat, it is not true that the sort of equality of access and quality that democracy requires exists now. But inequalities of access and quality are now seen to violate our presumptive commitments. It is exactly this commitment that Coulson asks us to abandon, assuring us that the market will provide for all. As it does with caviar and urban condominiums, no doubt.

Finally, this is not an argument against educational choice per se. However, school choice, if such there be, should be exercised within limits set by the polity (whose collective interests must be balanced against the individual good). Specifically, every school choice plan should have to meet two requirements: (1) only schools subject to public control receive public funds; and (2) all schools that are under public control receive adequate public funding. Given that the public interest is provided for, and given that the least powerful are protected, some form of educational choice might be a good thing. Nor is this an argument against the existence of private schools. However, we should neither abandon the enterprise of public education nor divert public funds to private schools and profit. We should have higher aspirations for our children, and for ourselves, than that.

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